

BARBARA ESS

Photographer Barbara Ess (b. 1944, Brooklyn, NY) was renowned for her haunting pinhole photographs and for performing in experimental bands in New York City's 1980s and 90s downtown art scene. Ess long used unconventional methods to underline the subjective nature of experience and representation. Ess' more recent projects in photography, video, and sound dealt with themes of boundaries, distance and separation. Employing lo-fi optical devices and image systems, small telescopes, and a toy microscope, Ess embraced the glitches and unintended artifacts resulting from her processes, seeking to depict the uncertainties of perception and uncover "ambiguous perceptual boundaries between people, between the self and the not self, and between 'in' here and 'out' there."

Barbara Ess received a BA from the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, Michigan and attended the London School of Film Technique in London. Upon her return to New York City she became involved with music, performance, photography and the creation of artist books. Ess had numerous solo exhibitions of her work throughout the United States and Europe, including retrospectives at the Queens Museum, NY, the Center for Fine Arts, Miami, FL and the High Museum of Art, Atlanta, GA. Other selected solo exhibitions were held at Magenta Plains, New York, NY; 3A Gallery, New York, NY; Thierry Goldberg, New York, NY; Incident Report, Hudson, NY; Wallspace, New York, NY; Moore College of Art, Philadelphia PA; Curt Marcus Gallery, New York, NY; Faggionato Fine Arts, London, UK; Frederick Giroux Gallery, Paris, France; Michael Kohn Gallery, Los Angeles, CA; Stills Gallery, Edinburgh, Scotland; Fundacion La Caixa, Barcelona, Spain; Galeria Espanola La Maquina, Madrid, Spain; Interim Art, London, England; Ghilaine Hussenot, Paris, France and Johnen+Schottle, Cologne, among others.

Her photographs have been included in group exhibitions at institutions including the Tang Museum, Sarasota Springs, NY; New Museum of Contemporary Art, NY; Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore, MD; Princeton University Art Museum, Princeton, NJ; Middlebury College Museum of Art, Middlebury, VT; Southeast Museum of Photography, Daytona Beach, FL; Contemporary Art Center, Cincinnati, OH; Victoria and Albert Museum, London, UK; and National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo, Japan. Barbara Ess was the subject of cover stories in *Artforum* and *Art in America* and a monograph of her work, *I Am Not This Body*, was published by Aperture in 2001. Her work is in numerous permanent collections, including The Art Institute of Chicago, The Whitney Museum of American Art, Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, The National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, The Carnegie Museum of Art, The Walker Art Center, Pompidou Center/Muse d'Art Moderne, and Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, TX. Ess was an Associate Professor of Photography at Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson for over two decades.

Collector Daily
April 12, 2023

Barbara Ess: Inside Out @Magenta Plains

By Loring Knoblauch / In Galleries / April 12, 2023



Comments/Context: When a sophisticated contemporary photographer deliberately decides to employ a homemade pinhole camera to make his or her images, we can assume that we are dealing with an artist who wants to push back on the traditions of the medium. While virtually any digital camera purchased today will nearly automatically deliver a consistent set of crisply perfect exposures, a pinhole camera is inherently makeshift – depending on the mathematical proportions of the simple box and its aperture and the way the camera is then used by the photographer, all kinds of distortions, blurs, and dark tunneled effects are possible (and likely). By choosing an artistic tool that delivers such unstable and improvisational aesthetics, the photographer is signalling that he or she wants to explore ideas and moods outside the ordinary.

This show gathers together a selection of Barbara Ess's pinhole photographs from the 1980s and 1990s, giving us a taste for how her conceptually-savvy and experimentally-rich photographic mind leveraged the atmospheric qualities of such a simple camera. Each of the images on view feels both intimate and uneasy, expressively probing emotional terrain that doesn't entirely want to give up its secrets.





Ess's 1986 pinhole image of a woman in a kitchen picking up the shards of a broken cup turns a mundane moment into something fleetingly ethereal. The scene itself is straightforward – a woman bends down to pick up the fragments of a broken white cup which has fallen on the kitchen floor; the setup includes the checkerboard tiled floor of the kitchen, the nearby cabinets, the dark legs of a disembodied man, and the woman herself, crouched down in a black dress decorated with white splotches. But Ess's vision of this forgettable moment feels altogether surreal. Echoes of black and white jump and swirl around the frame, from the dress to the broken cup to the wildly distorted tiles of the floor. The scene is both sharp in some areas and blurred in others, with the light flared along the edges of the cabinets and behind the legs of the man and the form of the woman dissolving into darkness on the right. Seen as one integrated instant, the effect is strangely Alice in Wonderland magical, with time and whatever we might call reality being bent right before our eyes.

Several of Ess's photographs are steeped in a sense of hazy memory, of instants captured that are then refracted through the distorting mechanisms of the mind. In one image (from 1984-1985), a mother holds the hand of a child, perhaps on a walk in the park or backyard, with both figures seen from below and blurred almost into faint recognition. The low angle puts us in the mind of the youngster, with the towering mother overhead looming like a protective superhero (or ominous monster). In another (from 1984), an anonymous kiss on the sidewalk in New York seems to have been caught by a passing pedestrian, the unlikely passion of the moment somehow seared into the fleeting glimpse; the darkened edges of the picture seem to pull us right into the urban romance, the kiss taking place with dismissive disregard for whatever might be going on nearby. And a third image (from 2000) is called a self portrait, but all it reveals is a partial sighting of the artist, her face pulled into a distorted blur as the camera focuses its attention of the whorl of grassy meadow in the background behind her; Ess becomes an insubstantial ghost in this picture, a sunny day version of a self in a particular place perhaps now lost to the passing of time.





Images like these can often drift into a literalness that drains them of their mystery, but the best of Ess's pictures settle into uneasy psychological territory, leveraging the aesthetics of the pinhole camera to wrap her subjects in enveloping darkness and insubstantial blur. Are they images from the world around us, or fantasies (or memories) bouncing around in Ess's head? That we can't quite know is what gives these images their durable bite – their expressiveness wanders from exterior to interior without a defined border, making perception something more malleable than usual.



MAGENTA

PLAINS



ArtNet News
April 4, 2023

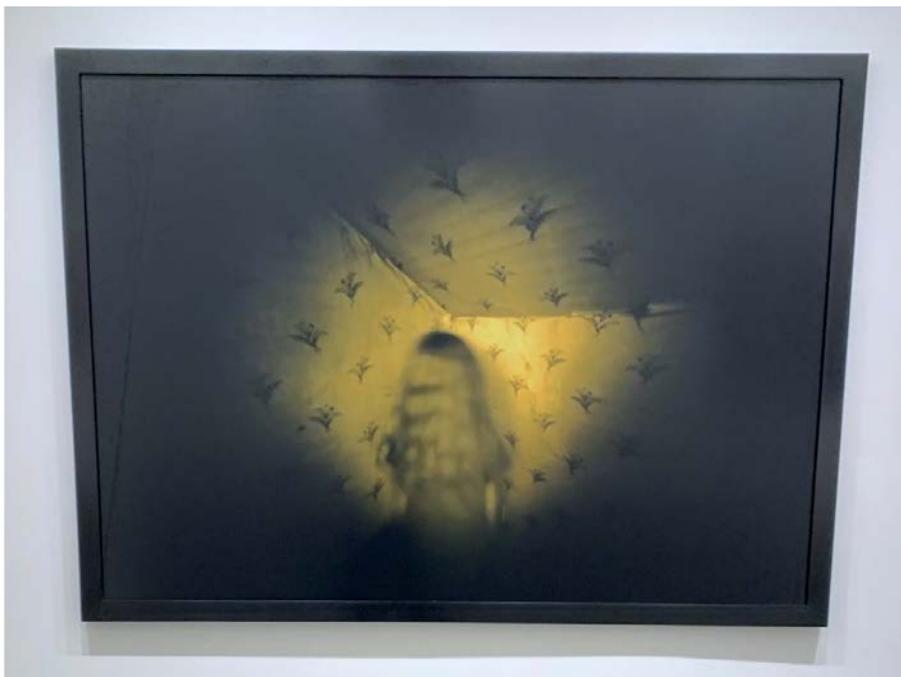
artnet news

Reviews

What I'm Looking at: Racy Paper-Cuts From China, a Video-Essay Takedown of Decentraland, and Other Stuff at the Edge of Art

Highlights from New York galleries from the last few weeks.

Ben Davis, April 4, 2023



“Barbara Ess: Inside Out” at Magenta Plains

Ess's art here, made in the 1980s and 1990s using her signature homemade pinhole camera, gave us photos with a recognizable look, fish-eyed and woozy. The specific scenes she captured balance a sense of off-handed reality and metaphorical tension: a little girl in a fort of sheets; a couple kissing in the street; a women having just dropped something on the kitchen floor. An Ess image makes you feel as if you are being seized by a suddenly surfaced memory, but the way a real memory really appears to you: not as a crystal-clear visual document, but as something that surges temporarily into the mind, full of half-articulated emotions and spectral context.

The Verdict: I hadn't actually seen Ess's photos before (she died two years ago). Now that I have, I feel like I have been playing with an art-history deck missing one card all along.

Musée Magazine
April 7, 2023

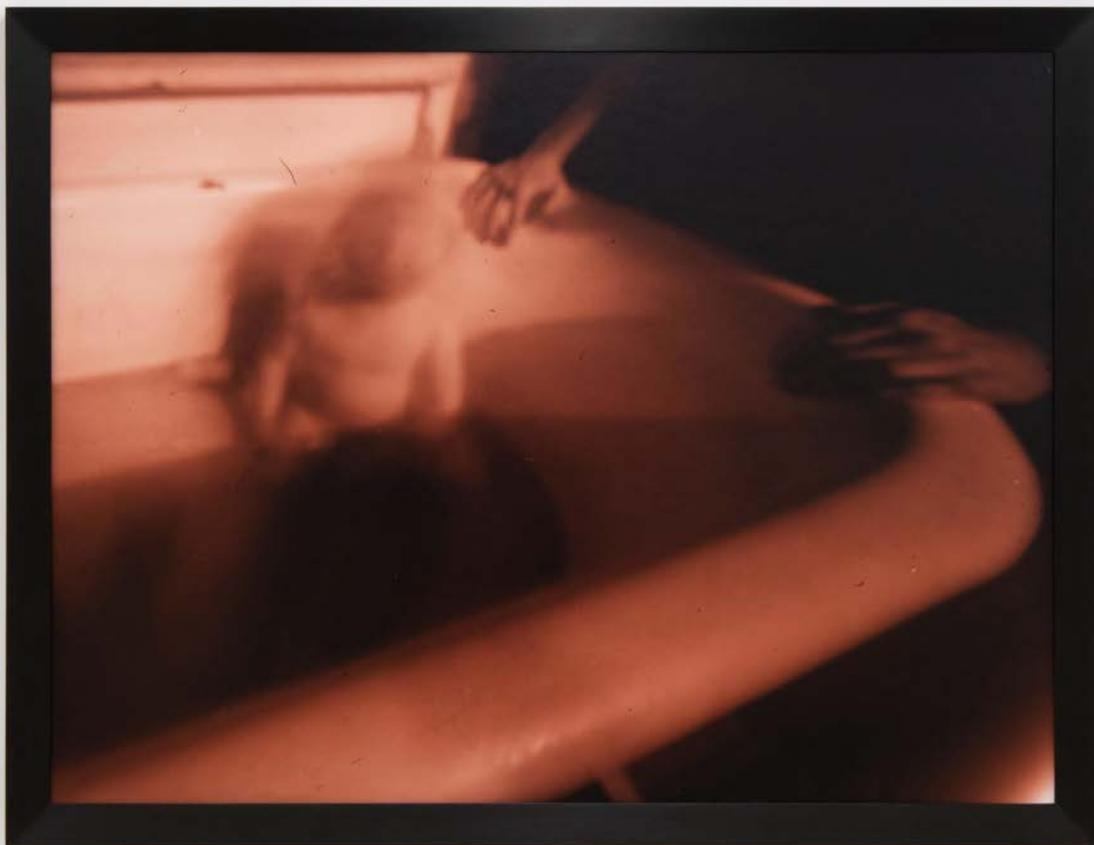
APR 7 EXHIBITION REVIEW: BARBARA ESS | INSIDE OUT

REVIEWS

Written by Jaden Zalkind

Copy Edited by Kee'nan Haggen

Photo Edited by Haley Winchell



Barbara Ess
Baby in Bathtub, 1986
C-print
31 x 41 in.
Edition of 5 (#1/5)
Courtesy of Magenta Plains

Written by Jaden Zalkind

Copy Edited by Kee'nan Haggen

Photo Edited by Haley Winchell

The *Inside Out* exhibition at Magenta Plains art gallery is the first solo posthumous showing of Barbara Ess' work. *Inside Out* celebrates Ess' vast repertoire and her unique style of strictly using a pinhole camera. Ess embodies an intimate style throughout her photographic practice that battles the struggle of isolation and uncertainty about the boundaries of our reality and the division between the human experience of interiority and one's perception.



Barbara Ess
Kiss on Street, 1984
C-print
42 1/2 x 32 1/2 in.
Edition of 3 + 2 AP (AP 2/2)
Courtesy of Magenta Plains



Barbara Ess
Head, 1991
C-Print
No signature
52 1/2 x 65 1/8 x 1 3/4 in.
Edition of 4 + 1 AP (#3/4)
Courtesy of Magenta Plains

In the early 1980s, Ess discovered the pinhole camera. Shortly after stumbling across this design, she decided to construct her version of it with the use of cardboard. She experimented with the distorting effects of this medium for decades. Her mysterious images allowed her to stretch the notion of what a photograph can be and authentically capture the world around her. The pinhole camera, a lens-less camera, creates a profound sense of vulnerability and intimacy through photographs of intense self-portraits, photos of others, and hazy depictions of the natural world.

“I am something that cannot be photographed, named, defined, or translated. There’s experience, and that’s all there is.”



Barbara Ess
No Title (Broken Cup), 1988
C-Print
52 1/2 x 78 1/8 x 1 3/4 in.
Edition of 4 + 1 AP (#2/4)
Courtesy of Magenta Plains

In the photograph “No Title (Broken Cup),” there is a warped image of a woman kneeling on the ground picking up pieces of a broken cup with a figure standing in the background, presumably a male, where we can only see their legs. This photo is blurred and bent, making the viewer wonder what is happening in this scene. The dark colors, blurred figures, and warped objects give the piece an eerie feel. The way the figure stands over the woman, intensely watching her pick up the broken pieces of the cup, makes the viewer believe it is a hostile and potentially dangerous situation. Is this image depicting an accident, domestic violence, or a drunken mistake? This image and many others of Ess are thought-provoking and engaging.



Barbara Ess
No Title (self portrait), 2000
C-Print
42 7/8 x 56 7/8 x 1 3/4 in.
Edition of 4 + 1 AP (#3/4)
Courtesy of Magenta Plains

A self-portrait is also featured, with half the image blacked out and the other half containing herself with a blurred face and background. Ess' hand is placed on her face, potentially biting her fingernails, revealing she may be anxious about what she is leaving behind or what will come.

Inside Out is unique. Barbara Ess' use of the pinhole camera offers the viewer a different depiction of photography and how a lens-less camera can provide another message and feel to photographs. Her work not only exemplifies the gap between the world and the mind but widens it. These photographs are untitled because she believes nothing needed a title, nor could it be.



Barbara Ess
Iron Hand of Love, 1984-85
C-print
42 1/2 x 32 3/4 in.
Edition of 5 (#2/5)
Courtesy of Magenta Plains

Barbara Ess
Girl in Corner, 1997-98
C-print
50 3/4 x 43 in.
Edition of 4 (#1/4)
Courtesy of Magenta Plains



BOMB Magazine
March 10, 2023

Excerpt from *Fragments* by Barbara Ess

Barbara Ess: *Fragments* is a posthumous publication of the No Wave musician and photographer's diaries and writing. The following is a selection of the fragments from this chapbook, released from *F Magazine* in March 2023.



Barbara Ess, *Highway*, 1995, C-Print, 40 × 60 inches. Image courtesy of the Estate of Barbara Ess and Magenta Plains, New York.

improvisation

shoddy

workmanship

MacGyver

rig up something in

a hurry using materials

at hand

n.d.

Picture of a picture of

a picture of a picture

n.d.

Aspirational?

Observing

Rent

Private Property

2015/2016

The Illusion of

Meaningful Agency.

2015/2016

narrative

rebellious.

why deconstruct a genre?

author really was bankrupt,

Can always say I lied.

force him to tell

his own demise

Have the big ideas

take a pratfall

2014

how to trap himself
back against a wall

how to trick yourself

doesn't resolve itself

Jean Marie Straub

Cinema is not a
language but a tool

2014

Beheading by shadow –
use of the frame to transform
automatism

actions without conscious thought
unconscious behaviors
computer automatic, discovery
app. automatic Grandview
the “found” aesthetic

– music
abstraction

Perception + Representation

immediate	suspect
experience	
	a set of
	signs for
	experience

representation as fraud
automatist procedures
of chance – in
photography?

2017

Brooklyn Magazine
February 6, 2023

NO WAVE'S NEW WAVE

The very brief, very downtown New York, cultural movement gets its due in a Paris retrospective

By [Jessica Robinson](#)

How does one create an exhibit about a quintessentially New York movement that, at its core, defied categorization? If you're in Paris of all places, you'll get your answer.

Through May 15, the Pompidou Center in Paris is hosting a radically original exhibition devoted to one of the more obscure — if not noisiest, shortest-lived yet highly influential — music and visual art movements in New York's cultural history: no wave.

"The exhibition," explains post-conceptual artist Joseph Nechvatal, "articulates for the first time some of the connections between no wave music, cinema and the visual art community in New York City in the late-1970s to the mid-1980s."

With its harsh, rhythm-based sounds and nihilistic lyrics, no wave was a fresh and innovative scene among avant-garde artists and noise musicians. Visceral, raw, liberating, no wave is considered New York's last cohesive, experimental, avant-rock movement.

Born in the low-rent district of Manhattan's lower East Side in 1978, no wave lasted only until 1981. But its influence has proven more long-lasting than the movement itself. Coming from a variety of artistic fields, no wave was an avant-garde art movement rebelling against the status quo and shaking up the art world with their boundary-pushing antics.

The Pompidou Centre's presentation borrows its title, "Who You Staring At?" from an album by John Giorno and Glenn Branca. The question refers to no wave artists' defiant attitude and determination to deconstruct the conventional gaze.

Superbly organized by art historian Nicolas Ballet, The Pompidou Center's "Who You Staring At? Visual Culture of the No Wave Scene in the 1970s and 1980s" consists of a sweeping variety of media, from dance, opera and music to the visual arts. This ensemble of multidisciplinary practices includes New York-based choreographer Karole Armitage and composer-musician Rhys Chatham's wonderful no wave ballet, "Drastic-Classicism"; a series of videos and films by renown, pioneering filmmaker Beth B, including her award-winning video, "Belladonna," and "Letters to Dad," produced in collaboration with filmmaker Scott B.

There are pinhole photographs by musician-photographer Barbara Ess, drawings by Raymond Pettibon, a slideshow of assembled drawings by post-conceptual artist Joseph Nechvatal set to the music of Chatham's "Die Donnergötter," plus Nechvatal and Chatham's "XS: the Opera Opus," and so much more.

Adding to the exhibition is a series of displays including an X Magazine poster, one of the rare publications to promote the different aspects of the no wave scene.

Ballet has also invited other Parisian venues to partake in this exciting exhibition including the Cinema L'Archipel, an alternative film movie house, and The Film Gallery, where one will see a collection of no wave flyers and Beth B's seminal documentary, "Lydia Lunch: The War is Never Over."

'You can't imagine the freedom'

The term "no wave" was first used as a tongue-in-cheek pun on the then-popular "New Wave" movement, but it quickly came to symbolize a form of resistance against being pigeonholed or categorized, allowing musicians and artists and filmmakers to have a greater freedom of expression.

"You can't imagine the freedom that we had," says filmmaker Scott B. "We'd take over buildings to have art shows. We dumped a car in the East River as a part of a film, and published photographs of it in The Soho Weekly News."

But no wave was not just about creating something new, it was also a survival guide to the chaos of New York City in the 1970s nicknamed, "Fear City,"

It was a tough place. The city was bankrupt, the tenements were crumbling, the streets were dangerous and poorly lit, the Bronx was burning and the rats far outnumbered the people (some things don't change). In this context, no wave was a commentary on the city's dire situation, but also a beacon of hope, a movement that refused to be beaten down by the darkness.

By taking something that was broken and making it whole again, taking something that was dark and making it light, no wave created a new reality.

But how did this brief movement create such a lasting impression? Perhaps the answer lies in the single word: "no." A word that could hardly be smaller, yet, like the no wave movement itself, it is a symbol of all the possibilities in rejection of the tropes of punk, from which it sprang.

"I remember seeing people like Patti Smith and the Ramones, who could barely play their instrument, getting up on stage and performing," recalls Rhys Chatham. "It freed us to perform an instrument without needing 10 years of studying the instrument before you could play in a technical way."

In other words, no wave showed that art could be raw, unpredictable, and even a bit dangerous. So dangerous, in fact, that, as Chatham tells it, when he and his group performed in such clubs as CBGB, the audience would throw beer cans. "And that was if they liked the music."

While it's true that no wave was largely unknown outside of the New York art and music scenes, it will forever be remembered as a pivotal moment in musical history. "Without no wave," says Chatham, "we wouldn't have indie rock and bands like Nirvana."

But it wasn't just about the sound, no wave also had a significant influence on independent film, fashion and the visual arts, from the work of designers like Vivienne Westwood and Comme des Garçons — who incorporated unconventional materials, bold patterns and unconventional silhouettes into their designs — to the independent films of Beth B.

“Films by Eric Mitchell and Vivienne Dick testified to the existence of a no wave cinema, which emerged in New York clubs and screening rooms such as the Millennium Film Workshop, The Collective For Living Cinema and the Bleecker Street Cinema, showing works by Amos Poe, James Nares, Beth B. and Scott B.,” says Ballet.

It was a movement that rejected the idea that art had to be beautiful or polished. Through its bold, often abrasive, experimentation, and fearless subversion of norms, no wave shattered the boundaries of what was deemed acceptable in popular culture and art, thus forging a path of its own and defining a new standard of artistic expression.

Or, as The New York Times put it: “Despite its brief, blippy existence, no wave has had a broad and continued influence on noisy New York bands, from Sonic Youth and Pussy Galore in the 1980s to current groups like the Yeah Yeah Yeahs and the Liars.”

The Pompidou Center's killer exhibition offers visitors a chance to get up close and personal with the artists, musicians, and filmmakers who defined the movement. The Center's dynamic and engaging setting is the perfect venue for soaking up the brilliance of an artistic movement that just won't die.

Hyperallergic
December 1, 2022

HYPERALLERGIC

Why Is There No Spanish at Art Basel Miami?

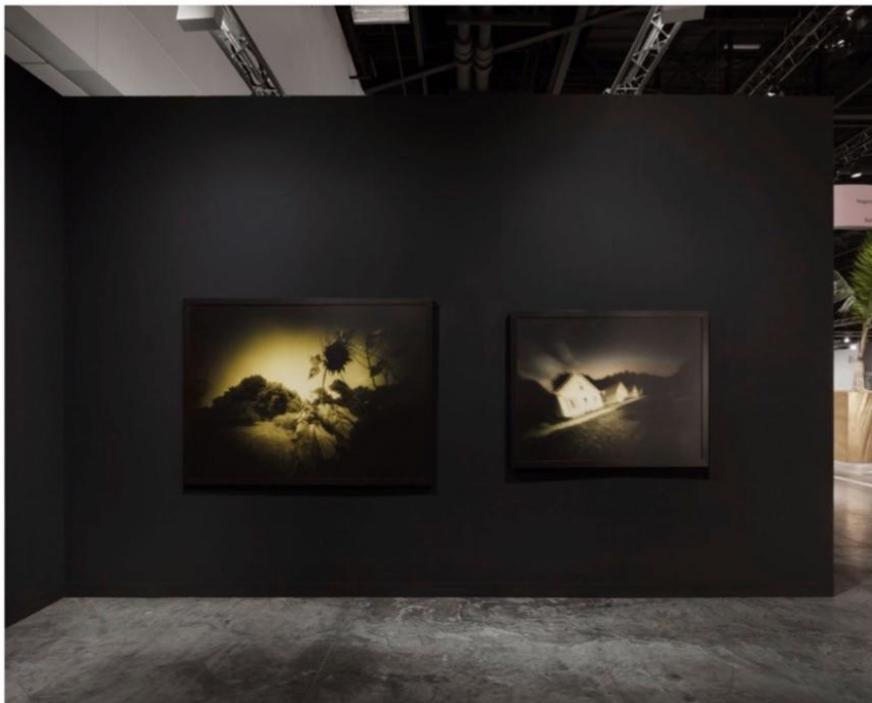
At this year's show, I reflected on the lack of bilingual materials, the absurdity of art-fair gimmick, and the workers who make it all possible.



by Valentina Di Liscia
2 days ago



Barbara Ess's dark and haunting photographs at the booth of the New York gallery Magenta Plains provided a welcome respite from all the obvious, trying-too-hard gallery displays. I chuckled at Jonathas de Andrade's "Lost and Found [Achados e Perdidos] (2020-2022), a sculptural grouping of 25 clay butts wearing tight, multi-patterned swimming shorts inspired by the forgotten bathing suits left behind in the changing rooms of Recife's swim clubs in Brazil. And Meredith Rosen Gallery's incredible contribution to the fair is a re-staging of Guillaume Bijl's 1984 "Casino," one of the Belgian artist's so-called "transformation installations," complete with functional blackjack and roulette tables. (When it was first exhibited at the S.M.A.K. art museum, Bijl's piece reportedly invited a visit from police officers who thought it was an illegal operation.)



Installation of Barbara Ess's photographs at Magenta Plains's booth

The Art Newspaper

November 28, 2022



THE ART NEWSPAPER

Photography
News

Undervalued photographers get exposure at Art Basel in Miami Beach

Fair will exhibit works by Jimmy DeSana and Barbara Ess, largely forgotten artists who were contemporaries of Robert Mapplethorpe

Linda Yablonsky

28 November 2022

The ultimate art experience is the one you have never had before. That is a bonus at an art fair, where collectors may find the new but not necessarily the different. Even more rare is the “experimental”, a euphemism for work of historical import that has been undervalued by the market. Two notable examples at Art Basel in Miami Beach are solo presentations of previously unexhibited photographs by Jimmy DeSana and Barbara Ess.

Now deceased, both artists were integral to the downtown New York art-fashion-music scene of the late 1970s and early 80s, but their legacies have not kept pace with those of their better-known contemporaries, such as Robert Mapplethorpe, Peter Hujar and David Wojnarowicz. Their time may be now.



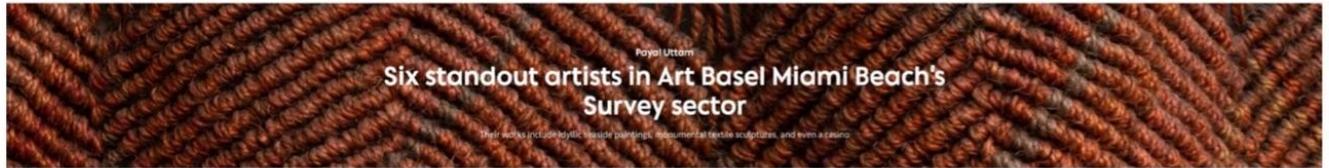
Barbara Ess, who died last year, used a pinhole camera to create ethereal images, such as her 1991 work *Head*

The Estate of Barbara Ess; courtesy of Magenta Plains, New York

Large, eerie pinhole camera works by Ess, a musician and film-maker as well as an artist associated with the New Wave scene, will appear in the Survey sector of the fair. The last pinhole camera prints remaining in the artist's personal collection, they are priced between \$30,000 and \$40,000. "Barbara was insistent on transforming the ordinary into the symbolic," notes Olivia Smith of [Magenta Plains](#), the New York gallery that has represented Ess's estate since her death last year. "The pinhole camera allowed her to abstract and distort the outer world to show how emotional subtlety and inner turmoil projected outward. Her interest was the barrier between, and her pictures are very relatable."

Art Basel
November 2022

Art | Basel



Barbara Ess (1948–2021, New York)
Presented by Magenta Plains, New York

After spending the early years of her career experimenting with film and music, the late American artist Barbara Ess chanced upon an article in the *New York Times* in 1983, about pinhole cameras – a lenseless camera often made of cardboard, pierced with a tiny aperture. She followed a diagram in the paper and built her own, quickly becoming fascinated with the possibilities it afforded to blur and distort images. For Ess, the pinhole camera almost became an extension of her inner consciousness, allowing her to conjure mysterious, fugitive images that brought to life states of liminality, ambiguity, and confusion. As she once said, 'I think of my work as an investigation and it's always concerned with the same question: Exactly what is the true nature of reality?' The booth of **Magenta Plains** will showcase a series of her haunting large-scale prints from the 1980s and 1990s depicting a variety of subjects, from a forlorn sunflower to an eerie-looking row of houses.



Barbara Ess, *Boy Watching Kiss*, 1986. Courtesy of the artist's estate and Magenta Plains.

Testudo
November 15, 2022

TESTUDO

Tips to Master Miami Art Week from Miami Beach to Your Own Home

BY ANNABEL KEENAN

Annabel Keenan is a New York-based writer specializing in contemporary art and sustainability. Her work has appeared in The Art Newspaper, Cultured Magazine, Brooklyn Rail, and Hyperallergic, among others.

With several major art fairs, dozens of museum exhibitions, and countless special events, Miami Art Week is one of the biggest times of the year in the art industry. While European collectors and dealers enjoyed the recent activities surrounding Frieze London and Art Basel's new Paris+ show, American audiences are soon flocking to Miami for Art Basel Miami Beach, with events launching the last week of November. As commercial and cultural endeavors, art fairs present perfect opportunities to see a broad cross-section of the newest and most buzz-worthy art. The sheer volume of activities can easily overwhelm, but these tips will help to navigate Art Week seamlessly.



The Lay of the Land: Miami Beach Fairs

[Art Basel Miami Beach](#) is undoubtedly the main attraction of Miami Art Week with big names like Hauser & Wirth and Gagosian who bring their most coveted, and often most expensive, works. Taking place in the sprawling Miami Beach Convention Center, the event attracts thousands of people, including dealers, collectors, and several celebrities. Visitors attend Art Basel, and any fair in general, for countless reasons from collecting art to learning about new artists to having fun at the myriad parties and events. Highlights of this year's edition include [Magenta Plains](#)'s solo booth of photographs by Barbara Ess and [Roberts Projects](#) group presentation including Amoako Boafo and Kehinde Wiley.

Understanding your goals is paramount before experiencing any fair, and this is particularly helpful for Art Basel. If you are planning on seeing a specific exhibitor or artist, make sure to look up the booth number and find it on a map. No matter how set you are on seeing something, missing exhibitors is shockingly easy, and there's nothing worse than navigating an entire fair for hours on hard concrete floors only to realize you forgot to look for something or someone.



Art Basel 2022. Barbara Ess, No Title (Sunflower), 1997-98, C print. Courtesy of Magenta Plains.

Il Giornale Dell'Arte
November 28, 2022



IL GIORNALE DELL'ARTE

Alla scoperta di talenti dimenticati

Entrando nel vivo delle proposte, ad Art Basel Miami Beach si possono ammirare opere di Jimmy DeSana e Barbara Ess, artisti in gran parte dimenticati, contemporanei di Robert Mapplethorpe. Entrambi, ormai deceduti, sono stati parte integrante della scena artistica di New York tra la fine degli anni Settanta e l'inizio degli anni Ottanta, ma la loro eredità non ha tenuto il passo con quella dei loro contemporanei più noti, come Mapplethorpe, Peter Hujar e David Wojnarowicz. Forse è arrivato il loro momento.

In concomitanza con «Jimmy DeSana: Submission», una retrospettiva sulla carriera del neosurrealista inaugurata questo mese al Brooklyn Museum (fino al 16 aprile 2023), la PPOW Gallery ha dedicato il suo settore Kabinett a 21 opere uniche realizzate dall'artista tra il 1985, anno in cui gli fu diagnosticato l'Hiv, e la sua morte nel 1990 all'età di 40 anni (i prezzi variano da 15mila a 20mila dollari).

«Sono passati 32 anni, dice Laurie Simmons, ex compagna di loft di DeSana, a volte modella ed esecutrice del suo patrimonio, e la sua opera diventa ogni giorno più attuale» In effetti, Wendy Olsoff, cofondatrice di PPOW, conferma che la risposta dei collezionisti prima della fiera è stata molto positiva. L'artista si è fatto conoscere con fotografie di scene a sfondo sessuale ma, a differenza di Mapplethorpe, senza visioni di sesso o genitali. Non era nemmeno un classicista. I vividi filtri monocromatici con cui elabora le sue stampe conferiscono loro una qualità onirica da Man Ray.

«Ricordo che galleggiavo in una piscina di un sobborgo del Connecticut indossando solo tacchi alti», ricorda Simmons a proposito di un servizio per Suburban, una serie del 1980 esposta nella mostra di Brooklyn. «Voleva che le modelle avessero qualcosa che si integrasse con lo spazio».

Per Drew Sawyer, curatore di «Submission», DeSana è «il ponte tra Fluxus e l'arte della corrispondenza e il gioco di immagini della Pictures Generation, l'artista proto-queer e punk che ha aperto la strada a Mark Morrisroe e persino a Wolfgang Tillmans. Ma la sua sovversività lo ha reso più difficile da assimilare». Negli ultimi anni, quando si è ritirato dalla vita sociale attiva, DeSana si è dedicato all'astrazione. I suoi «collage», come Olsoff definisce le stampe di Miami Beach, sono il risultato di ritratti fatti a pezzi con una lama di rasoio e rifotografati come stampe singole che sembrano vetri in frantumi.

«È lì che è andato quando ha capito che la sua vita stava per finire, in un regno spirituale». L'artista Jack Pierson, che ha assistito DeSana nella camera oscura, aggiunge: «Le stampe hanno una qualità simile a un gioiello e sono molto lucide. All'epoca sembravano un po' imperscrutabili, ma ora capisco che il suo obiettivo era la bellezza. Non si trattava di persone in vasche da bagno e cappelli da festa. Non c'era nulla di grezzo in loro. Sono molto ponderati».

Imponenti e inquietanti opere con camera stenopeica di Barbara Ess, musicista e cineasta nonché artista legata alla scena New Wave, saranno esposte nel settore Survey della fiera. Le ultime stampe rimaste nella collezione personale dell'artista hanno un prezzo compreso tra i 30mila e i 40mila dollari.

«Barbara insisteva nel trasformare l'ordinario in simbolico», osserva Olivia Smith di Magenta Plains, la galleria newyorkese che rappresenta l'eredità di Ess dalla sua morte, avvenuta lo scorso anno. «La macchina fotografica a foro stenopeico le permetteva di astrarre e distorcere il mondo esterno per mostrare come la sottigliezza emotiva e il tumulto interiore si proiettassero all'esterno. Il suo interesse era la barriera tra le due cose, e le sue immagini sono molto realistiche».

ArtNet News

May 19, 2020

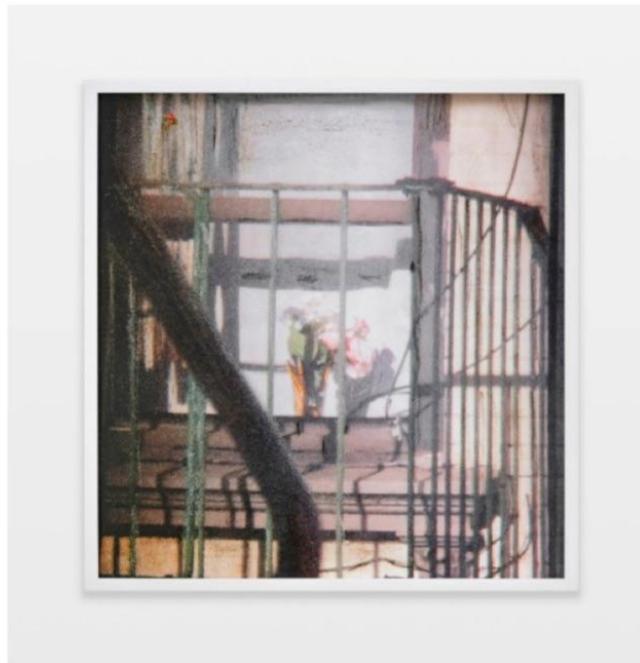
artnetnews

Lonely Days Can Make for Great Art. Here's How 10 Artists Found Inspiration in Isolation, From a Bedridden Frida Kahlo to a Jailed Egon Schiele

Whether in imprisonment or exile, these artists channeled their isolation into creative fuel.

Katie White, May 19, 2020

Barbara Ess



Barbara Ess mastered the fire-escape photo long before the rest of us. The American photographer and musician has been making moody, shadowy photographs with a pinhole camera for decades, capturing all manner of life, from late-night scenes of New York City in the 1980s to, more recently, life on the US–Mexico border.

In 2018, Ess found herself holed up in her apartment with a bad case of bronchitis that lasted for over a month. With a much smaller (and literal) creative aperture, the artist turned to the views from her apartment and the small details of her daily domestic sphere. With that, her “Shut In” series was born—a set of small prints Ess marked up with silver, black, and white crayons and later scanned and enlarged.

The Nation

June 14, 2019



Photographing the Otherworldly and the Abject

Barbara Ess's lo-fi photos, which pluck scenes from our culture's surveillance regime, make the banal seem terrifying and mystical.

By Barry Schwabsky

JUNE 14, 2019



Barbara Ess's *Beach (From Balcony)*, 2016–19 (Courtesy of Magenta Plains)

There's no simpler photographic apparatus than a pinhole camera. Any lightproof box with a tiny aperture on one end and some film inside will get you a picture, no lens needed. There are commercially manufactured pinhole cameras, but aficionados make their own. It's a DIY kind of thing.

Barbara Ess hadn't really found her *métier* as an artist until she built her first pinhole camera, following a diagram in a 1983 newspaper article. But she was already a name on the downtown scene, the publisher of *Just Another Asshole*, an occasional mixed-media magazine (the word "magazine" here covering anything from a photocopied zine to an insert in another magazine—*Artforum*—with squibs featuring tabloid-style headlines such as "Worker Abandons Self to Pigs" and "'Lady' Paid With Coupon," to an LP record featuring 77 tracks, each under a minute long), and a musician in post-punk bands the Static and then the Y Pants.

The Y Pants were an artists' band; the sculptor Kiki Smith said, "Many of their lyrics had become part of my vocabulary. They're my youth. It was 'girlie punk music' with a hidden bite to it." Future Sonic Youth front man Thurston Moore was impressed not only by their music but also by how Ess was part of a new trend in musicians' names: "Last names like Lunch, Place, Chance set up a new breed of blankness from earlier punk names like Hell, Rotten, Vicious. But Ess was even more halting, possibly even more subterranean in effect." Part of the Y Pants' appeal was their instrumentation. The sight and sound of Ess passionately strumming away on a ukulele were hard to forget; so were those of her bandmate Gail Vachon attacking a child's toy piano with equal panache.

No wonder Ess was ready to take a low-tech, DIY route to image making. She gained immediate attention with a 1985 exhibition at New York City's Cable Gallery that, as critic Jean Fisher declared at the time, reinvented "the effect of the photographic...by returning to the first-order image and its simplest mode of production," bringing pinhole photography to the mainstream art world and vice versa. Ess turned all the ostensible defects of her primitive technology into artistic gold. With the images enlarged and printed with an overlaid tinge of a single understated color, the blur, distortion, and extreme perspectives produced by the lensless camera seemed to show another world within or beyond the everyday. Instead of fixing a moment in time, permanently recording what would otherwise have been seen for just a moment, they seemed to show something the eye alone could never witness. The darkening of the field around the edges of the images and the concentration of light at their center seemed to convey a radically subjective viewpoint with no distinct boundary to the visual field and a capacity to highlight the most essential sights and ignore the rest. A dog's bony forepaws on the pavement, a couple embracing on a seemingly vast otherwise empty beach, a row of white suburban houses tipping toward and away from a tree-darkened horizon like stumbling drunkards at twilight—these simple observations of perfectly recognizable yet somehow inexplicable forms stranded in unaccountably vast and devouring space, at once perfectly ordinary and somehow spooky and sinister, seemed to question the ground of reality itself.



"Guys on Corner [Remote Series]," 2012/2019. (Courtesy of Magenta Plains)

Or was it simply the photograph itself under question? The artist defined photographs as "these traces of a moment when wisps of light pass over the physical world...like a shadow on a cloudy day, a poor reflection in a dirty mirror, a representation that can't contain the juice" yet exposing "the poignancy of the mute surface of the physical world. The physical world itself so promising and comforting even in

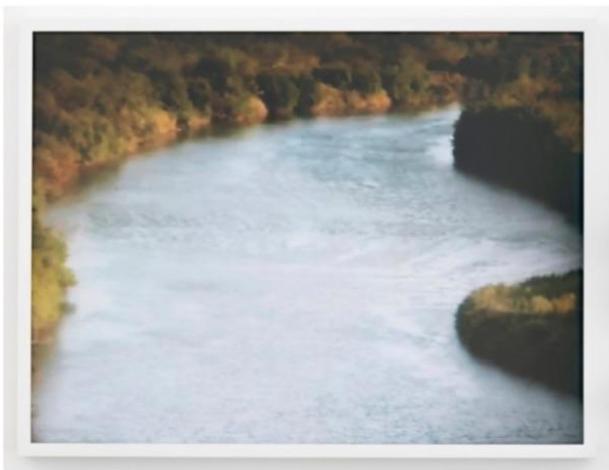
its damaged, crumbling, flooded, shining, decaying, pathetic state." It's revealing that, among her other activities, she organized an exhibition of "thoughtographs" by Ted Serios, an alcoholic former bellhop who claimed to be able, when drunk, to project images from his mind onto Polaroid film. Whatever the trick he really used to produce them, those blurred and indeterminate images did somehow feel like the result of some intensely concentrated but intangible mental process. One could see why Ess might be captivated by them. And yet they had none of the haunting depth of her own photographs. Another photographer, Mark Alice Durant, complained that Serios's photographs were too obvious in their elusiveness:

Diaphanous, blurry, vignetted, and incomplete. As with Victorian spirit photographs or UFO images, it seems that the visual proofs of paranormal activity must be conveyed in styles analogous to their tenuous accessibility. These other worlds supposedly captured on film, whether they are spiritual, telepathic, or alien, represent parallel universes that are simultaneously close by and far away—here but not here, visible only to sensitive clairvoyants or sensitive film. The photographs, then, straddle the fence between knowing and not knowing, between hard evidence and invisibility. The camera may sometimes act as a visual doorway to other worlds, but it is as if the lens were made of cheap plastic, offering only refractions, foggy figures, and ambiguity.

The pictures Ess made were and were not like that. She was able to find something poignant and true out of this collision between the otherworldly and the abject. Not that behind the world we perceive is a phantasmic one but that the world we perceive is phantasmic—without substance yet with untold depths.

By the 1990s, Ess's photographs were being shown in museum exhibitions in the United States and abroad. In 2001 the Aperture Foundation published a book of her work, *I Am Not This Body*, its title referring to a Buddhist thought exercise in questioning the idea of identity. As the artist explained, "The meditation goes, 'I am not this arm. I am not this leg. I am not this head, etc.' until you get to 'I am not this thought.'" Since then, however, she has been less present on the exhibition scene, or at least I haven't come across her work as much. All the more welcome, then, was the opportunity to catch up on some of her work—photographs as well as video and sound pieces from 2007 through this year—in the recent exhibition "Someone to Watch Over Me," which took place at an enterprising artist-run gallery on Manhattan's Lower East Side, Magenta Plains.

None of the new pieces appears to have been made using a pinhole camera, though there is a fuzzy, low-tech, low-resolution feel to most of them, despite the fact that many were made by piggybacking on an elaborate and technologically advanced infrastructure—that is, the Internet. The exhibition title refers not to the romantic yearnings so sweetly encapsulated in the 1926 George and Ira Gershwin song of the same name but to the Internet's surveillance regime. What's more, many of the works derive from the artist's participation not as a subject of surveillance but as one of its agents, albeit a double agent.



"Rio Grande," 2012/2018. (Courtesy of Magenta Plains)

In 2007, under a plan approved by Texas's then-Governor Rick Perry, it became possible for anyone anywhere to take part in scrutiny of the state's border with Mexico, thanks to a network of cameras set up by the company BlueServo, which allowed part-time amateur sentinels to enroll as "virtual Texas deputies" and monitor the cameras' streaming video. Journalists later denounced the whole scheme as a boondoggle; the state used \$2 million in federal funding to underwrite the installation of hundreds of cameras, but only about a dozen were put in place, leading to just three arrests in the first year of operation.

Maybe one reason this surveillance-oriented network proved so ineffectual was that, along with any number of true believers who took up the call—or sort-of true believers, like the guy who told the BBC that he gets “a kick out of coming home from a day in the office and playing border guard. It’s more interesting than TV”—it attracted others who were just curious or even, like Ess, saw it as ripe for *détournement*, that is, turning it against itself, scrutinizing the act and apparatus of observation more than the spied-on scene itself. I don’t suppose she ever reported to the pertinent authorities anything she saw as she watched the Texas border from her New York apartment. It was the imagery itself, and how the imagery seemed to reflect on the act of looking, that offered material for the artist. Like Serios’s bogus thoughtographs, the Texas border scheme served up a grift appealing to the mind’s ubiquitous paranoid need to find significance in inchoate, seemingly prosaic images.

The mostly monochromatic photos from Ess’s “Surveillance Series”—shot in 2010 and ’11 but mostly printed this year—show nondescript scenes: a herd of white horses wandering up a hilly landscape, no humans in sight; a bend in the river with a road nearby, where nothing seems to be happening and no one’s to be seen, though crosshairs are on a random spot near one shore; a stand of trees is reflected in the water’s surface; a single automobile with its headlights on, off-road on what might be a patch of sand. It’s the graininess and pixelation of these low-res images and the way their unstable ratios of light to dark make them seem to keep shifting between negative and positive that give them their paradoxical allure: The very fact that you can’t quite see what’s there arouses a subliminal desire to puzzle them out. In a surprising way, their elusive, ambiguous quality rhymes with her earlier pinhole photographs’. Here too, suggestiveness and a sense of mystery are evoked through purely automatic means, in this case the surveillance camera and what feels like a digital dirt road—rather than the superhighway—by which the images reached the artist.

So, for example, in *Single Car (Surveillance Series)*, the vehicle, caught in the upper-right corner of the picture, seems to float eerily above the ground on a cloud of white light. I was thinking that this white nebulosity underneath the car must be a shadow in negative, but then the car's headlights are just as bright, and in negative they should be black, like the windshield above them. The various shades of what are presumably foliage and maybe, toward the left, some water form a hazy set of floating tonal areas, which the swarming pixels seem to conjure bit by bit like brushstrokes in a painting. Yet just as a factual-minded view of the image has to conclude that the impulse to see this as a possible crime scene can never be verified, the equal and opposite temptation to see this as a painterly dreamscape has to crash on the realization that this will never be anything other than a banal scene of daily life along the Rio Grande. Somehow, that's not a formula for disappointment, because it means that the image, no matter how aestheticized and no matter how inscrutable its ostensible content, never becomes a vehicle for mystification.



Single Car [Surveillance Series] 2011/2019. (Courtesy of Magenta Plains)

The show at Magenta Plains also included images taken from other live feeds. Urban traffic is a recurrent topic. *Stranded (Remote Series)*, from 2011, shows cars stuck in a snowstorm. *Guys on Corner (Remote Series)*, from 2012 and '19, focuses instead on the pedestrian scene around a street lamp; the

visible lights on the pole seem to have been burned into what otherwise would have seemed a bluish monochromatic print—one of the most striking moments in the exhibition, in which the evidently distant scene seems to have directly touched the paper on which it was printed. (The photographs in the show have been realized as archival pigment prints. Color may have been introduced to color or black-and-white originals in the production process by not only digital means; some were touched up with crayon before being enlarged.)

sculptures make use of a gridded-oval pattern that I found on the interior of a collapsible folding table while cutting into it with a CNC router. The pattern appears as something like a thumbprint — digital but implying a progression toward its completion. The ovals are like units of labor in that way, but also have a certain ornamental end point.

Modularity, pattern and the grid are inherent to the subjects I consider. In “The Golden Door” I’m mostly interested in the sublime reflections that happen when glass-curtain buildings reflect onto each other. The grids of the quilts situate this distortion in a more personal, organic means of making.

Are your works meant to be “unlocked” for your commentary, or are they best viewed purely aesthetically?

There are layers of information in each individual work that comprise a visual language I’ve been developing over time. This includes my own exposure to industrial parts and a consideration of their internals. I don’t necessarily think this information is meant to be unlocked or decoded, but I do think there is a reveal of sorts as you spend time with a work. For example, the freestanding sculptures and sculptural wall works appear as the metal of a machined part, but are made out of wood, Formica and metallic blinds— materials more native to interiors.

Urban space and the mechanical are fused, and the aesthetic outcomes of transparency and reflection are amplified as I make the work. I think these abstractions retain their references but allow for a more subconscious relationship to a surging development environment that we inhabit. The pieces as installed unlock this further perhaps because while the works are autonomous they have relationships with each other, like those of buildings.

Some of your works appear to play off of well-known masterpieces, like your “Winged Victory,” which is evocative of “Winged Victory of Samothrace,” at least in name. What’s behind this decision?

For that piece, I wanted to relate a common form, the folding mechanism in a collapsible picnic table, to a classically accepted notion of beauty.

Why have you called the show “The Golden Door”?

“The Golden Door” comes from the last line in Emma Lazarus’s “The New Colossus,” the sonnet that is cast onto a plaque on the Statue of Liberty. I was interested in this idea of threshold space to America, and how the current state of the nation might also be a threshold of sorts, one that could have different implications while making use of the same words. The Golden Door used to be the gateway of opportunity and optimism. Now, upon entering New York City, the physical landscape is full of urban development and global investment, enhanced architectural gilding that is mostly the mark of a very specific class.

What have you hoped to accomplish with the exhibition?

For this exhibition, [I’ve tried] to describe a near hallucinatory, unintended aesthetic outcome of mass development and that space as holding possibilities for resistance. The buildings and the reflections couldn’t exist without each other, and so they are seamed together in the show, suggesting a balance of power but in an entirely different realm.

You’re quite a young artist — what do you hope to achieve next? How do you see your career unfolding?

At the moment I feel entirely invested in the content, and there is so much more for me to explore within the terms I’ve set out for myself. I am interested in my work actually redirecting the built landscape by making works that will live outdoors. I am also interested in working on larger installations with more complex exchanges between the works.

Anything else you’d like to discuss or mention?

The current geopolitical landscape is the outcome of a slow but long-term suppression of individuals and their worth. This is tangible even in very mundane contexts including those that aren’t televised. There are only a few historic means to shifting this, but as with reflections we are an interface between parts that must be contended with and which come with opportunities for redefinition.

More information: <http://www.magentaplains.com/>

<https://www.blouinartinfo.com/>

Founder: [Louise Blouin](#)

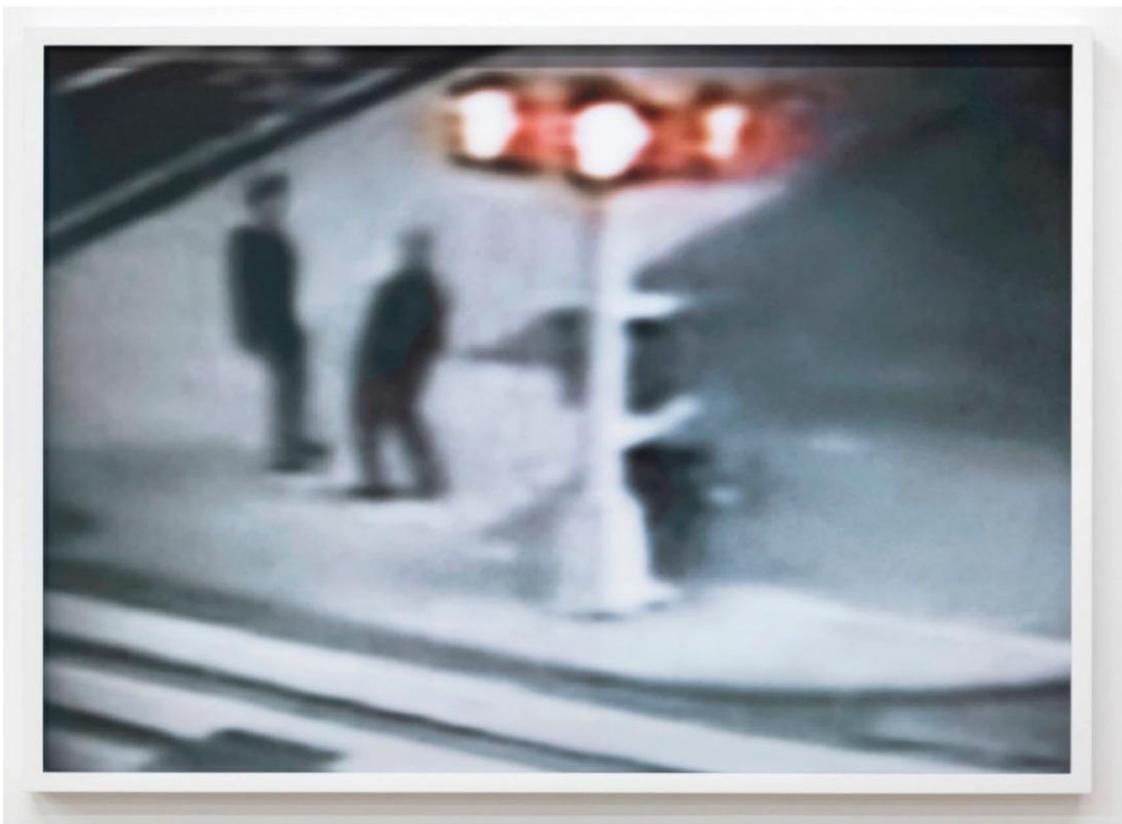
The New York Times

April 30, 2019

The New York Times

Barbara Ess

Through May 12. Magenta Plains, 94 Allen Street, Manhattan; 917-388-2464, magentaplains.com.



“Guys On Corner” by the photographer Barbara Ess, 2012/2019 archival pigment print.
Barbara Ess and Magenta Plains

Half a dozen arguments about knowledge and perception run through Barbara Ess’s new show, “[Someone to Watch Over Me](#),” at Magenta Plains. This photographer, author and former No Wave rocker is known for favoring lo-fi technology like the pinhole camera, and every image in the exhibition — whether taken at home, grabbed from surveillance footage on the internet, or shot through a telescope — is blurry.

It might seem like a familiar, if perennially topical, comment on the unreliability of photography as a medium. But this blurriness also unmasks the role that the viewer's expectations play in making a picture: The five white blobs in a staticky gray print called "Wild Horses" do look like horses, but if the piece were titled differently you would also believe they were just digital noise. Sometimes the blurriness dampens your impulse to interpret, as in the alluring "Beach (from Balcony)." You can't make out any details; all you can do is enjoy the pretty colors. Most of all, by stripping an image of its extraneous ambiguities, Ms. Ess's studied blurriness leaves in place only such facts as she can transmit with certainty.

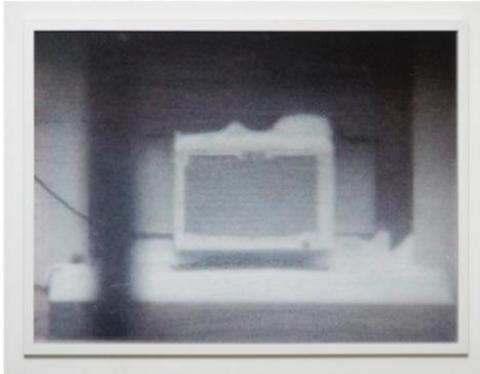
In "Guys on Corner," two figures dressed in black face each other on a New York City street corner. You know it's New York from the flashing orange of the Don't Walk sign, and you know the sign is orange thanks to a minimal but sufficient halo of reddish pixels in an otherwise monochrome print. Is one of them leaning back in disbelief at something the other said? Has he been shot? Or are they ogling someone out of frame? If you could see their expressions, you'd have to guess. But because you can't, you stick with what you know: Just two guys on a corner, like the title says. *WILL HEINRICH*

Artforum

April 26, 2019

ARTFORUM

CRITICS' PICKS



Barbara Ess, *AC [Shut-In Series]*, 2018/19, archival pigment print, 20 x 27".

Barbara Ess

MAGENTA PLAINS

94 Allen St

April 7–May 12

While surveillance watches from above, *sousveillance* watches from below. Computational engineer Steve Mann coined this term to describe a way of “enhancing the ability of people to access and collect data about their surveillance” in order to neutralize it. With her inaugural exhibition here,

“Someone To Watch Over Me,” Barbara Ess—photographer, musician, and founder of the No Wave experimental mixed-media publication *Just Another Asshole*—takes up *sousveillance* as a call for covert participation.

In 2010, the artist became a “deputy sheriff” for an internet surveillance community that staked out the border between Texas and Mexico. Becoming a part of this group allowed her entrée to a network of different cameras—heat-sensitive and low-resolution—which she used to create “Surveillance,” 2011–19, and “Border,” 2010, two of the four series of photographs on view in this show. Rather than try to monitor suspicious activity, such as trespassing or drug trafficking, Ess made screen captures of wild horses traversing a mountainside by night, for instance, and an electric-fence warning: images of beauty and caution that, though banal, somehow feel threatening.

“Surveillance” led Ess to investigate other kinds of feeds via weather, traffic, and vacation cameras. With her most recent series, “Shut-In,” 2018/19, the artist turned the camera toward objects in her home and the changing light throughout the day. Not unlike the protagonist of Alfred Hitchcock’s 1954 film *Rear Window*, Ess, confined to her home with a case of bronchitis (rather than Jimmy Stewart’s broken leg), turned her journalistic interests to the quotidian: from an image of a pink bouquet on her fire escape at the golden hour to a soft, almost painterly portrait of her AC unit. Unlike Stewart’s character, Ess doesn’t unearth evils perpetrated by her neighbors. Instead, she observes the violent mechanization of sight and, along with it, authority itself.

— Sophie Kovel

The New Yorker

April 19, 2019

THE
NEW YORKER

ART

Barbara Ess

The New York artist has long depicted a spectral parallel world, mining the pinhole camera's tendency to distort, blur, and abstract. In this show, Ess, who is also well known as a figure in the downtown music scenes of the eighties and nineties, explores other lo-fi methods of mediation. Her night-vision images of the Texas-Mexico border, for which she gained access to an online network of surveillance cameras, are uncanny and painterly. "Wild Horses [Surveillance Series]," from 2010, shows grazing animals as tiny white silhouettes in an inky, pixillated landscape; in another photo, a snaking river becomes sinister, seen through crosshairs. Things closer to home become strange, too, in the most recent works on view. Confined to her apartment for a month with bronchitis, Ess turned her attention to such subjects as the air-conditioner across the alley, and the grainy results cast a cabin-fever spell.

—*Johanna Fateman*

Through May 12.

📍 Magenta Plains
94 Allen St.
Downtown

917-388-2464

[Website](#)

Frieze

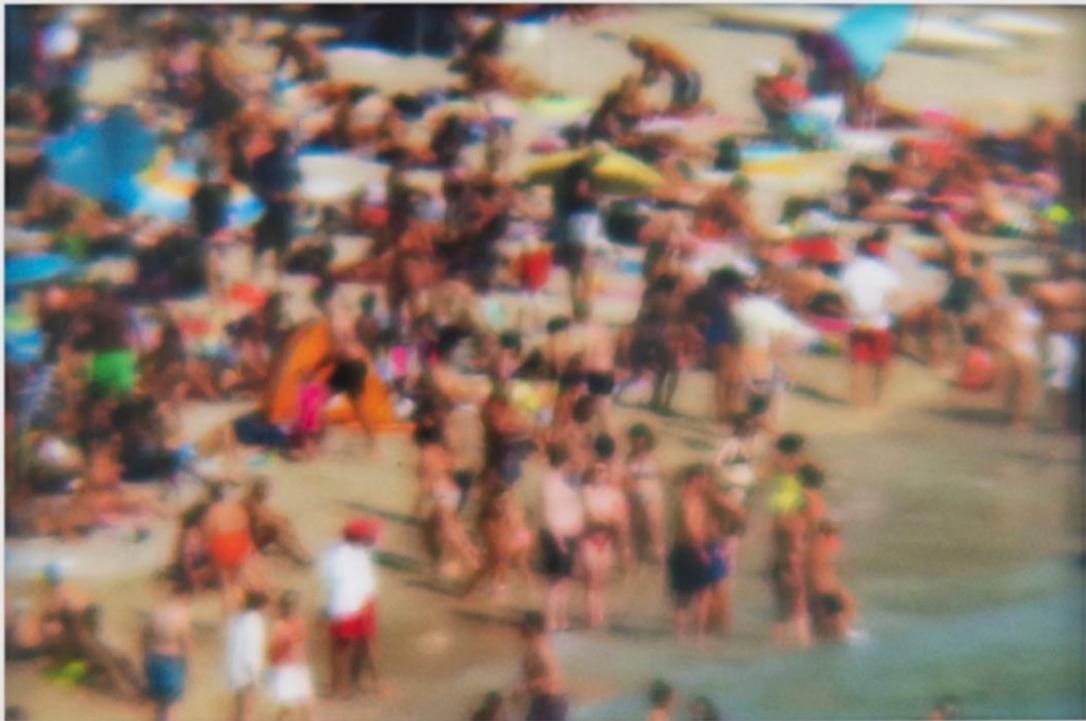
April 30, 2019

Frieze

Critics'
Guides /BY SHIV KOTECHA
30 APR 2019

The Shows To See Around Town During Frieze New York

With the fair now on, your guide to the best exhibitions in the city



Barbara Ess, *Beach* (From *Balcony*), 2016/19. Courtesy: the artist and Magenta Plains, New York

[Barbara Ess](#)

Magenta Plains

7 April – 12 May

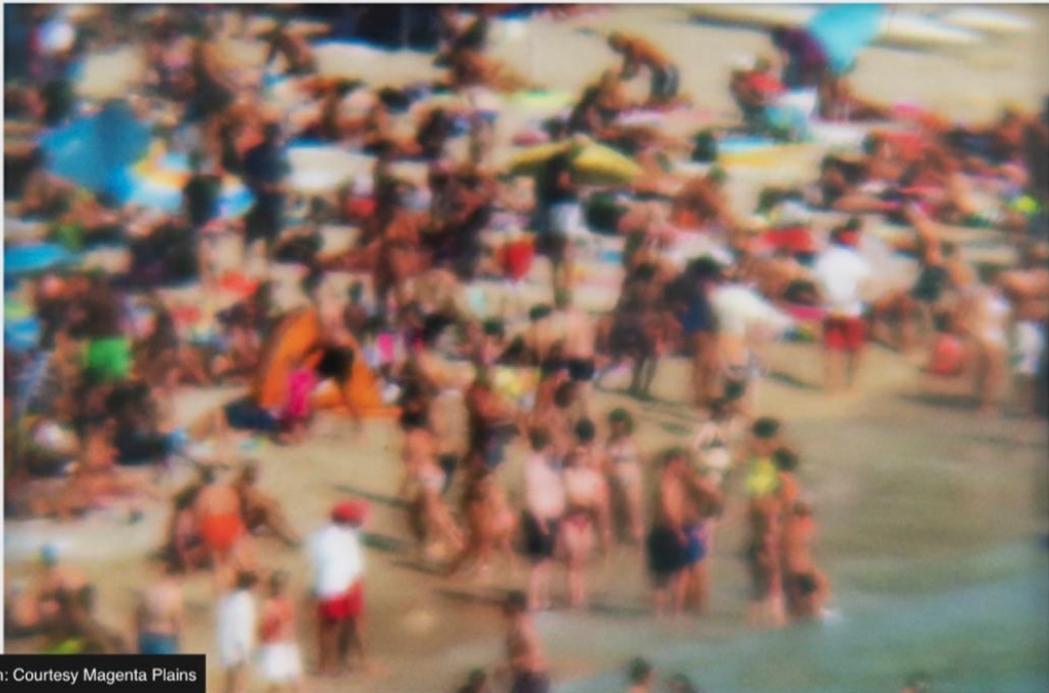
For her first show at Magenta Plains, New York photographer, No Wave musician and founder of the pioneering zine *Just Another Asshole*, Barbara Ess mobilizes techniques of militaristic reconnoitring and pinhole photography to examine the perceptual rifts and power dynamics at play between what is watched over and what is seen. Sourcing images, sound and video from various online communities – a live feed monitoring the border between Texas and Mexico in her ‘Surveillance’ series (2011/2019), for instance – and moody, domestic shots of Ess’s New York City apartment, the artist’s exhibition ‘Someone to Watch Over Me’ arrests its viewer with the painterly residues of lo-fi imagery. A video, *Nightlights* (*Surveillance Series*) (2011), shows footage of night at the border – a horizon in the distance, or the top of a fence? It is hard to say. Individual pixels blink in slow irregular sequence; through cross-hairs, Ess’s aim is to blur.

Time Out New York

April 8, 2019



Barbara Ess, “Someone To Watch Over Me”

Art, Contemporary art  [Magenta Plains](#), Midtown West  Until Sunday May 12 2019

Photograph: Courtesy Magenta Plains

TIME OUT SAYS**DETAILS****DATES AND TIMES****USERS SAY**

A fixture of the 1980s Downtown scene, Barbara Ess performed in a number of bands aligned with a post-punk movement known as No Wave—among them, the proto-Riot Grrl ensemble, Y Pants. She also founded and edited *Just Another Asshole*, a mixed-media endeavor that published seven issues in as many different formats, including zine, record album, tabloid newspaper, magazine, exhibition catalog and paperback. Throughout her variegated career, Ess also pursued an art practice focused mainly on pinhole camera photography, whose blurred, ghostly qualities served her dark sensibility well. This show offers new works, including enigmatic images based on surveillance footage gathered from various online watch communities.

Filthy Dreams

May 2, 2019

filthy dreams

ART

Collapsed Distance: Barbara Ess Observes and Surveils at Magenta Plains

Posted on May 2, 2019 by ADAM LEHRER

[Leave a comment](#)



Barbara Ess, Fire Escape [Shut-In Series], 2018/2019. Archival pigment print (Courtesy the artist and Magenta Plains)

American art critic Kristine McKenna, [writing for the Los Angeles Times](#) in 1991, referred to artist Barbara Ess's signature pinhole photographs as "luxuriously beautiful." Those photographs, in which subjects are blurred, information is blacked out and realities blend into fantasies, expose photography as a medium that, at its best, is rife for the subjectivity of the artist to be imparted onto it. As the digital age has progressed, the extreme beauty and creepy sensuousness of Ess's images have become even more apparent. As digital images get clearer, images by artists such as Ess have acquired a rarefied and dignified quality. These are images that don't even purport to act as a document of the truth; instead, they announce themselves as the products of an artist's gaze. "Everything is subjective," says Ess, then in the throes of making final preparations at her gallery [Magenta Plains](#) in the 24-hours leading up to her current exhibition [Someone to Watch Over Me](#). "What we have is our own experience really. There are many realities."

Just because Ess is known for using antiquated equipment, an image of her as a disconnected analog fetishist is false. At the gallery, Ess is alert, extrapolating and communicating the potential meanings within her work with confidence and ease. She keeps up with culture, too. Perhaps as a holdover from her days editing the iconic 1980s downtown NYC art and literary zine *Just Another Asshole*, Ess voraciously consumes new exhibitions and films. Her knowledge of contemporary music is shockingly astute, considering how overwhelming it is to keep up with music in the age of Apple Music and SoundCloud, and the accessibility of literally everything (if you are a reader of avant-garde music sites such as *The Quietus*, don't tell me you don't get overwhelmed by the sheer amount of groundbreaking music being made available to you daily). Ess is currently excited by a Mongolian metal band and also expressed interest in attending [the Ende Tymes festival](#) of experimental electronic and noise music, which, of course, makes sense considering her memberships in pioneering No Wave bands such as [Y Pants](#) and The Static.



Barbara Ess, *Roses*, 1989, C-print (Courtesy the artist and Magenta Plains)

Ess doesn't nostalgize the past, neither in terms of larger culture nor in the analog technology she chooses to make art with. Ess's work, with its tendency to frame the technological glitch as a visualization of ethereal sublime, has a much more elemental notion driving it: Ess prefers to make art within a confined set of limitations. "Maybe I purposefully limit my capabilities so that I don't have such large array of things to choose from," says Ess. "Limitation is my muse, in a way."

At *Someone to Watch Over Me*, Ess's first solo exhibition at Magenta Plains, the artist uses a range of lo-fi optical devices and image systems, small telescopes, and a toy microscope, all materials offering their own specific set of limitations. The stunning exhibition is split between two bifurcated, but nonetheless related concepts. The first half of the exhibition presents work from Ess's *Surveillance* series. Ess signed up as an online "Deputy Sheriff" with an Internet surveillance site set up to observe the U.S.-Mexico border. Captivated by the ability to collapse the distance between her gaze and the subject matter, Ess began recording the surveillance process. It would be near impossible to not identify a political reading of the video and prints that Ess created through her surveillance of the U.S.-Mexico border, especially when considering the toxicity that surrounds the border narrative in contemporary American politics (and Ess concedes that she thought the border narrative would likely give the work "some urgency"). But Ess is clearly more interested in the conceptual conceit of the project and the aesthetics of the images that came out of the project than she is the inevitable political discourse that is attached to the work. "I liked that it was thousands of miles away," the artist explains. "It's not exactly voyeuristic in that sexual sense. It's about being up close and personal but also far, far away at the same time. That's what interested me at first."



Barbara Ess, *Single Car* [Surveillance Series], 2011/2019. Archival pigment print (Courtesy the artist and Magenta Plains)

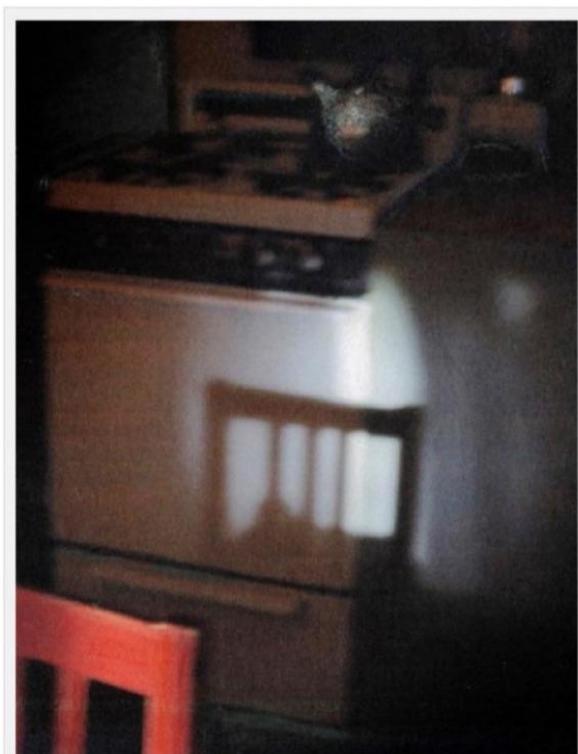
The prints from the *Surveillance* series are painterly. The poor image quality brings a haunting abstraction to almost uncannily mundane scenarios. *Wild Horses* (2010), for instance, finds a lineup of horses illuminated by a spare infrared light, and depicted as whitewashed silhouettes against a desolate and hazily rendered landscape. The series' culminating video piece simply documents some of the footage observed by Ess. The allure in watching the surveillance play out is fascinating; one could imagine that a fairly xenophobic, anti-immigrant individual would sign up for this surveillance service, but only those that find themselves driven by more universal desires, such as watching, end up using the technology for any extended period of time. When you watch the video for extended periods, you will see bodies and forms slowly drift through the landscape: in the age of digital surveillance, we are all performing and having our performances observed.



Barbara Ess, *Guys On Corner* [Remote Series], 2012/2019. Archival pigment print (Courtesy the artist and Magenta Plains)

Moving on from her *Surveillance* series, Ess used similar technology for her *Remote* series. Recording the surveillance of weather, traffic and vacation (a color print of a beach scene depicts something of a lush ode to mass mundane recreation), the work reinforces the eerie atmosphere that permeates the body of work at large. We are observing the observations of an artist. The artist's gaze is present in the work, but certainly the artist never was present. Can distance be collapsed? Is watching from afar, regardless of technology, always different than watching from up-close? These are all questions that Ess would have her work's viewers grapple with. "What is it like where you are not and what is it like where I am not?" asks Ess.

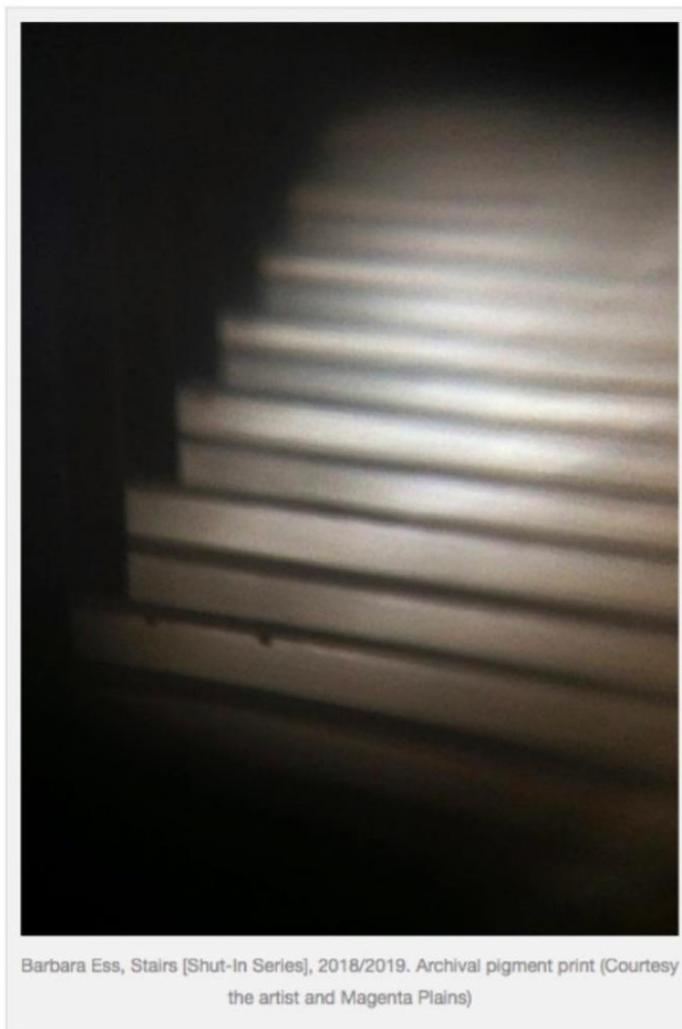
The second half of the exhibition, composed of photographs from Ess's *Shut-In* series, furthers the exhibition's overall theme of observation, but unlike the *Surveillance* series, removes the distance between the artist's gaze and her subject not just technologically, but also literally. The photographs were shot by Ess in her apartment when she was home sick with bronchitis for a month. Ess began noticing, contemplating and eventually photographing previously ignored details from her immediate environment: domestic objects, the changing light on the fire escape outside her window, etc. Just as in the *Surveillance* works, Ess uses analog technology to collapse whatever distance might be in-between her subject and her gaze, only here she is using telescopes to get even closer to objects and stimuli in her direct environment (distance isn't just collapsed, but decimated). "There's something to being present with something that's far away," says Ess. "But this forced me to be familiar with the present."



Barbara Ess, Kitchen [Shut-In Series], 2018/2019. Archival pigment print (Courtesy the artist and Magenta Plains)

Again, one can read here any number of analyses of contemporary culture (particularly the notion that it takes falling massively ill to get a contemporary human being to slow down, take self inventory, and immerse oneself in the beautiful mundanity of an environment). But, Ess is also attracted to the work's formalism as much as she is to any particular social readings. "I have lived in my apartment for a very long time, and I started noticing," Ess pauses for a moment, before demonstrating a sly smirk and continuing, "or 'surveilling,' what's been there all along and I hadn't noticed."

The prints from the *Shut-In* series are, like most of Ess's body of work, subtly striking. Ess made small prints of the photographs before enhancing them with silver, black and white crayons. She then scanned the prints and enlarged them. Ess's work doesn't suggest concepts like "the beauty in the mundane" so much as it emphasizes the power of an artist's subjectivity over an object. Her subjectivity is perhaps even heightened in the *Shut-In* series due to the isolation she endured whilst developing the work.



Ess has little interest in the concept of photographic image as document of the truth. Her work in the new exhibition, as well as her signature pinhole photographs, almost makes more sense when considered in the context of Ess's background in film than it does in the context of photography history. While in college at the University of Michigan, Ess attended the Ann Arbor Underground Film Festivals and saw avant-garde films by filmmakers [Maya Deren](#) and [Stan Brakhage](#). Back in NYC, she went to many screenings at [Anthology Film Archives](#) of experimental and structuralist films by [Paul Sharits](#), [Michael Snow](#), [Ken Jacobs](#), [Joyce Wieland](#), and others. She then briefly attended film school in London, but dropped out to co-run the London Filmmakers Co-Op. "Those experimental films were my entry point to art," she admits.

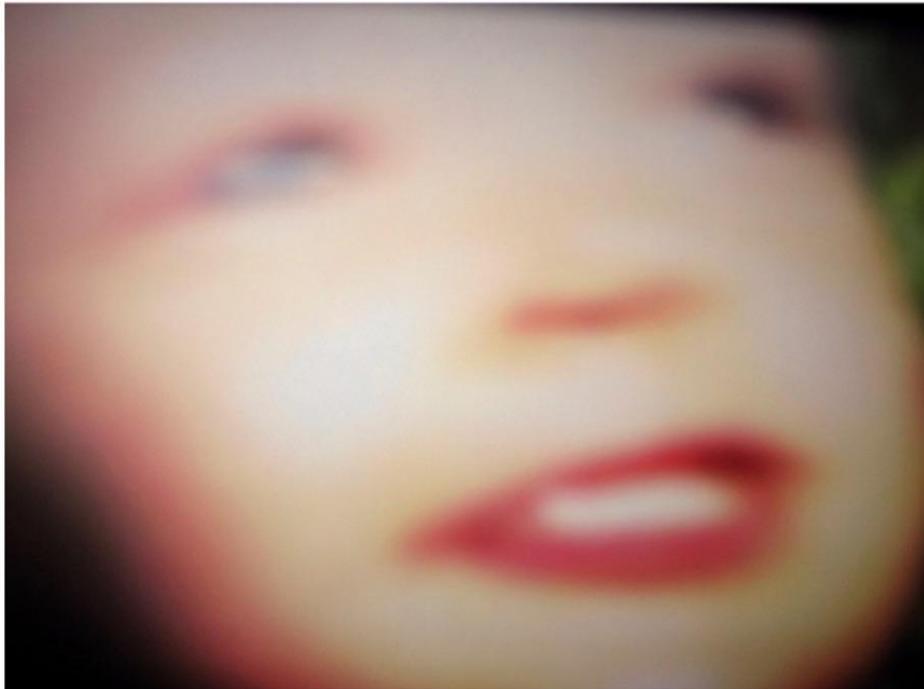
Like experimental film, Ess's work presents no strict narrative. She exploits lo-fi equipment to achieve her aesthetic. And most importantly, Ess works within limitations, a hallmark quality of classic experimental cinema. Soviet film theorist Lev Kuleshov said that film viewers tend to derive meaning from cinematic images through sequence and editing. This notion can be applied to Ess's work. Her images are all startlingly beautiful on their own, but when presented as a cohesive whole, they vibrate off one another and create a heightened mood, and possibly, a personalized meaning.

Elephant

April 20, 2019

ELEPHANT

Image of the Day



April 20, 2019

Barbara Ess, Promise, 2007

Feminist photographer Barbara Ess emerged in New York's downtown scene in the 1980s, so naturally, she was in a No Wave band—the brilliantly named Y Pants. She also edited the equally brilliantly titled zine, *Just Another Asshole*; now, she's being celebrated for her photography work. A new show at New York's Magenta Plains gallery entitled *Barbara Ess: Someone to Watch Over Me*, showcases her work from the last four decades, presenting her distinctive use of the pinhole camera and low-tech methods. "My camera distorts and I like that," Barbara has said, "I like distortion in music too because it loosens things up." The show runs until 12 May.

Artforum

Summer 1994

ARTFORUM**Barbara Ess**

Barbara Ess' dreamlike photographic images—made with the most primitive of cameras (a pinhole camera), then enlarged and printed in delicate monochromes—are immediately compelling. We see a white dove's rosy wing, its feathers opened like a hand, diaphanous folds of cloth, and a patch of floral carpet illumined in green, soft as an exhalation. These images possess a clairvoyant, peripheral-visionary intelligence; some are as indelible as those from one's own dreams.

The word "duvetyn" (the name of a soft fabric with a twill weave used in downquilts) seems to serve as a tutelary daimon for the show. Following the title is a condensed etymology of the Indo-European root of duvetyn, "dheu." This root is the base of a wide variety of derivatives, beginning with the meaning "to rise in a cloud" as dust or vapor, and including types of breath (vaporous, sometimes visible) and spirit. Other points along the historical trail of the root include the words deer, dust, down, dusk, deaf, dumb, dove, and dwell.

Ess is drawing the comparison with words to suggest an etymology of images, as if one might trace related images back to their original root or etymon, the "true image," and in the process, uncover the relations among them. This process would include archetypes and symbolism, but not be exhausted by them. It would draw on the accumulated histories of images, as if every image carried within it the record of every time it has been seen, imagined, or used.

In the four close-up images of folded cloths, these glowing white duvetyn forms seem animated, as if they concealed living beings. To the left is the other primary source image, the dove's wing in flight. One is reminded of Medieval iconography, where the dove often represented the "ministering wind" of the Holy Spirit, or symbolized the soul.

There were two more images of doves, printed onto small, down-filled pillows, like theriomorphic dream talismans. On the reverse sides of the pillows were printed texts drawn from Freud's controversial case-study *A Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria*, 1905. Dora's first dream and Dora's second dream were uninterpreted, quoted like images. After a while, it became clear that all of the other images in this room—a homey embroidered house, a diptych depicting a woman, hands crossed over her breasts like wings that recalled Hannah Wilke's work—related to Dora's dreams.

Picking up on Dora's second dream, in which she is trying to get to the train station, the show concludes with a 5-minute-and-40-second videotape, based on the climactic scene from Michael Powell's 1951 film *The Red Shoes*, in which the ballerina runs down a metal staircase, across a yard, and leaps off a balustrade to her death on the train tracks below. The constituent elements are pulled apart and rearranged to uncover the unconscious of the images. The sound of birds chirping begins faintly and builds gradually until it overwhelms the image. The running legs of the ballerina become the fluttering wings of a bird, and when she flies from the balustrade, a cloud of vapor rises from below.

Following the big retrospective of her work at the Queens Museum last year, Ess might have been expected to slack off a little in this new show. Instead, she's struck out into yet another frontier of the phantasm.

—David Levi-Strauss

The New York Times

June 2004

The New York Times

ARTS

ART GUIDE

JUNE 11, 2004

A selective listing by critics of *The Times*: New or noteworthy art, design and photography exhibitions at New York museums and art galleries this weekend. At many museums, children under 12 and members are admitted free. Addresses, unless otherwise noted, are in Manhattan. Most galleries are closed on Sundays and Mondays, but hours vary and should be checked by telephone. Gallery admission is free unless noted. * denotes a highly recommended show.

BARBARA ESS, "Cipher," Wallspace, 547 West 27th Street, (212) 594-9478, through June 19. Ms. Ess continues to make poetically blurry photographs using a pinhole camera. This small show includes a dark, dreamy image of a sunlight-suffused forest; a sequence of self-portraits in which the artist progressively disappears into the light; and the ominous image of a ziggurat taken from a small newspaper photograph. Also on view is a video in which a hazy, abstract field of color is accompanied by a voice naming all kinds of fears, including fear of the night, snakes, poverty and being buried alive (Johnson).

The New York Times

May 1998

The New York Times

ART IN REVIEW

By GRACE GLUECK MAY 1, 1998

Barbara Ess

'Wild Life'

Curt Marcus Gallery

578 Broadway, near Prince Street

SoHo

Through May 22

Known for her use of a pinhole camera, a cardboard structure with a tiny lensless aperture, Barbara Ess makes subtly toned color photographs that are not so much reality as visionary versions of it. Blurry and distorted, they seem to coax their subjects from mysterious spaces, like the tilted row of white houses set in an anonymous landscape and shining in the moonlight that breaks over a dark line of trees. A kind of yearning nostalgia pervades this photograph, like a timeless and placeless dream fragment that lingers in the mind.

The photographs, made on black-and-white negatives, are printed on colored papers whose tones are kept to delicate, dark nuances. Sometimes only the faint, yellowish tint of light prevails, as in an balletic glimpse of a woman shown from the waist down wearing a diaphanous, tutu-like skirt rigged with Christmas tree lights. The circle of light that surrounds her also reveals a pair of dainty legs and pointed black-shod feet -- an image from nowhere that, like certain Joseph Cornell creations, has the lure of a fin-de-siecle fantasia.

One of the most appealing shots poses a pair of long, shapely legs against the dark, still vastness of a lake, conveying the lazy calm of a summer sojourn, when the question of whether to venture in or not can loom as a big decision.

There are some less successful works here, like the pictorial view of a nude woman's back with a mass of hair that seems too archly 19th century. But this is a beautiful show. GRACE GLUECK

The Los Angeles Times

November 1991

Los Angeles Times

ART : Shadow Land : With a pinhole camera, Barbara Ess conjures up a hallucinatory world where everyday images become eerily seductive

By KRISTINE MCKENNA
NOV. 10, 1991 12 AM PT

"I think of my work as an investigation and it's always concerned with the same question: Exactly what is the true nature of reality?" says New York artist Barbara Ess of her darkly disturbing photographs.

"I don't know if there's an essential reality it's possible for us to get a grip on," she adds, "but I know I don't experience life primarily in terms of the physical world--my emotions and memories play a much larger role in shaping my experience as a human. I know there's a me that's more solid than this body I move through the world in."

Groping through the ether in pursuit of an essential reality, Ess has produced a body of work that reads as a brooding meditation on the shattered state of life in the late 20th Century. Working with a pinhole camera, Ess manipulates the distortions that are an unavoidable part of that simple mode of picture making so that the distortions read as metaphors for psychological states; her warped interpretations of scenes from everyday life are heavy with a sense of the weight of the past, and of disintegrating social structures.

The pinhole camera--basically a cardboard box with a hole in it--has no focusing mechanism and distorts space and light by pushing the background far into the distance and blurring forms in the foreground. Also known as photograms, pinhole photographs were first developed by William Henry Fox Talbot in 1835. Man Ray elaborated on the technique a century later with his Rayograms, but pinhole photography is rarely used by fine artists. However, it's ideally suited to Ess' sensibility, which she describes as "rooted in ambivalence and confusion. I'm attracted to pinhole photography because my mind works better when my means are narrowed."

Freighted with an undercurrent of bewilderment and loss, her pictures--on view at the Michael Kohn Gallery in Santa Monica through Nov. 30--hide their anxious subtext behind seductive surfaces. Gary Indiana, art critic for the Village Voice, has described Ess' work as "simultaneously ravishing and creepy in a manner evocative of paintings by Whistler or Turner," and her pictures *are* luxuriously beautiful. The pinhole camera makes intensely sensuous images that undulate and shimmer, images so fluid they seem to depict a world that hasn't yet congealed into solid form. Like artists Gerhard Richter, Christian Boltanski and the Starn Twins (all of whom work with photographic distortion), Ess blurs the edges of the physical world, thus pushing it into a hallucinatory realm; like work by those artists, her images vibrate with an eerie, lyrical violence.

Andy Grundberg, former photography critic for the New York Times, commented that "in making images charged with a darkly ominous undertone, Miss Ess has a finger on the pulse of the times." However, that comment comes as a bit of a surprise to the artist who doesn't see herself as a social critic by any stretch. Her involvement with her work is far too personal for that.

Talking at a Hollywood cafe, the 43-year-old Ess points out that it's not her intention to produce a pessimistic cultural critique. Rather, what she's really interested in is "the place where our interior life intersects with the outside world--and the place where that happens is the body. My interest in that connection intensified a few years ago because I became very ill," adds Ess, who's titled her current series of work "I Am Not This Body."

"During that same period my mother and lots of my friends were sick and dying, so this became a very pressing subject for me. And, being a woman, the issue of aging is also very complex. We all have to deal with the fact that although we experience life largely through our souls, the world judges us in terms of our bodies."

An intense, open woman who comes across as remarkably innocent considering that she's spent the better part of 20 years in Manhattan, Ess lists the central inspiration for her art as "my childhood, taking LSD, the important experimental filmmakers, and Patti Smith's first album, 'Horses'--that record was such a revelation for me when I heard it in 1975. It's so passionate and alive with the sense of possibilities--it gives off a real physical sensation of joy."

Like punk rock's reigning diva, Ess had a multimedia artistic coming of age that included writing, filmmaking, performance art, visual art and music. Born in Brooklyn, the eldest in a family of three girls, Ess recalls: "My father was a truck driver, but as a young man before the war he was an artist who did commercial design. So there were art books in the house and I can remember going to museums with my father. I had a great childhood, very rich and happy, and my family was very liberal--in fact, my grandfather was a communist.

"I remember my childhood fondly and it's not my intention to invoke the negative aspects of childhood," she adds in explaining a recurring theme in her work. "Rather, I think I'm attracted to the primal way children see the world. Children are wide open to everything and they're learning at an incredible rate. Of course, childhood does have its dark side and like every child I can remember seeing weird things when I was growing up."

After completing high school in Upstate New York in 1965, Ess spent the next four years at the University of Michigan where she earned a degree in literature and philosophy. After graduating from college, Ess moved to New York where she spent a year working as an editor at a political magazine called War Peace Reporting. During that same period she became caught up in the burgeoning experimental film scene, which prompted her to enroll at the London School of Film Technique in 1971.

“I wanted to go to film school because I was inspired by the films people like Stan Brakhage and Bruce Conner were making, but I got to film school and they were teaching us how to be gaffers. I thought, ‘To hell with this--I want to make a film!’ So I dropped out and bought a little Super-8 Bolex and started working for the Film Co-op in London.

“My films never had linear narratives and most of them were Structuralist--I see a clear connection between my films and the images I’m making now,” she says. “I used to use stop action a lot--in a sense my films were like animation--and now with my photographs I often feel like I’m trying to condense an entire film into a single image.

“I had no religious upbringing,” she continues, “but during the early ‘70s when I was making films I got into the teachings of Georges Gurdjieff, an Armenian mystic who died in 1949. I was attracted to Gurdjieff because I was looking for something and was having a hard time accepting life in terms of physical reality. It just seemed like there had to be something more--not because I found life so unfair, but because it seemed so boring. I got pretty deeply into Gurdjieff and I found some answers in that philosophy too, but it’s a very puritanical system of belief and I wanted to have more fun, so I drifted away from it.”

Ess’ transition from film to photography began in 1974. “I wanted to travel and film is a very encumbering medium, so I got a Polaroid camera and began traveling and making books that combined snapshots, drawing and text.”

Returning to New York in 1976 after two years on the road in Europe, Ess became involved with the underground music scene that was about to explode there. “I remember when I first plugged in an electric bass just loving the surge of power I felt--it was fantastic,” recalls Ess, who played with several bands during the ‘70s and ‘80s, including Daily Life, the Static, Y Pants, No Shame and Listen to the Animal. “I loved being in bands, but over the years it just evolved that I stopped doing it. I miss playing and writing songs--let’s face it, going to an opening is not too thrilling compared with performing onstage with a band. Still, I wouldn’t want to be doing that now.”

In 1978, Ess met avant-garde composer Glenn Branca when she auditioned for his band Theoretical Girls. She didn't get in the band, but the two have lived together ever since.

“We fell in love immediately, and he's been a real important source of inspiration for me. In New York people don't talk about work, they talk about gossip and careers, and Glenn is the main person I talk to about my work. We get up every day at about 9, have coffee and spend a few hours talking about ideas, then we both go to our studios.”

The same year Ess met Branca she began publishing an occasional underground periodical that's taken the form of an album of sound pieces by artists, a compilation of writings by artists, and an anthology of photographs by 123 artists. It was also in 1978 that she had her first solo exhibition, at New York's Franklin Furnace, where she presented “Census,” a photo essay on the people and their apartments in the building where she lived. Shortly after that show she began conducting another survey where she questioned dozens of people about their experiences with the psychological state of ecstasy--a theme central to her work throughout the '80s.

It wasn't until 1983 when she built a pinhole camera based on a diagram published in the New York Times that Ess stumbled across the ideal format for her creative concerns. “It was just right for what I was trying to do,” she recalls. “My camera distorts and I like that--I like distortion in music too because it loosens things up.”

She spent the next three years producing images, working as a typesetter (a job she needed to support herself until 1988 when she began to make enough to live on with her art), showing in group exhibitions, reading (she cites writing by Paul Bowles, Primo Levi, Paul Auster and Louise Erdrich as among her favorite) and “hanging out in my studio hoping things would crystallize in me that I could understand.” In 1986 the Curt Marcus Gallery began handling her work which presently sells for \$2,500 to \$6,000, and for the past five years she's exhibited regularly throughout Europe and the U.S.

As to how she sees her art evolving, Ess says “in a sense it never really changes. When I try to get clever I fail, so I stick with the basic issues of human life on earth--sex, death, relationships, discovering who you are, being hurt and confused. My last show explored the ambivalence I feel towards domesticity. We all want the comfort domesticity provides, yet it’s claustrophobic. When I was growing up I can remember observing couples who were always having private little dialogues and they wouldn’t let you in--domestic intimacy is a subtle form of exclusion. Everyone builds their fences and they keep it neat on the inside and throw their garbage outside. That body of work involved things like images of fences with decayed roses.

“This new work is about language,” she says, describing the images on view at Michael Kohn, several of which are based on pictures she found in newspapers. “I’ve never appropriated before, and I should point out that this work is not intended as a media critique--I’m not interested in art about art or art about media. Anyhow, I was looking at the New York Times all the time and I started crumpling up the paper and shooting photos of the news photos. By the time I finished this work, newspapers had come to sicken me--they’re so much about guys in suits and disasters, and they’re filled with images that are either horrifically cute, or depict people in pain.

“I was attracted to those images in the paper though, because so much of the behavior you see depicted there seems mechanical and unreflective. I find something so poignant about unawakened life, the people who dutifully go through their life without thought. I’m interested in daily life and believe that the key to the mysteries of existence are there. You don’t have to look to the sky or go to a psychic--our daily life holds all the answers. But it’s hard to recognize them--at least I have a hard time sorting it all out. I wish I knew what I was supposed to be doing having a life on earth,” she concludes with a bewildered, curiously happy sigh.

Artforum

Summer 1990



PRINT SUMMER 1990

X Y ESS

INASMUCH AS WE INHABIT a world choked with images, we are subject to an incessant barrage of fictions, each projected as some quantity of truth—or, at least, of credibility. The phenomenon is fueled, of course, by the mass media, but it implicitly involves the history of art. The mystical faith in symbolic figures, from primitive cultures to contemporary religious art; the authority granted to engravings and other printed pictures from both since and before the invention of photography; the tendency to accept historical, portrait, and other academic genres of painting and sculpture as if they were factually correct—all these examples of images' reception by their audience illustrate that visual art has been a primary source of cultural misinformation, misrepresentation, mythification, persuasion, and hallucination. Whether unwittingly or quite intentionally, artists have rendered nature, civilization, and human experience as seemingly objective physical realities, as if what they claimed to see were not in some way a construct of their own vision. And it would be naive to expect that their apprehensions of actuality would not be made use of by whatever institutional forces are operant in the environment of the time. Thus artworks, and particularly photographs, have acted as figments of mediated evidence, false windows on the world through which we the viewers gaze without necessarily recognizing the distortions created by this particular glass, or the difference between the camera's eye and our own, between the three-dimensional event and its impression, or, ultimately, between what is and the phenomenology of observation.

It is inevitable that our thoughts, personal histories, emotions, and sensory perceptions will distort and disguise reality, or, rather, will be involved, actively rather than passively, in whatever we encounter. The subtle intervention of the psyche in the process of collective and individual witnessing is a radical *X* factor, a variable, unmeasurable, unknowable, and irrational term that has undermined the certainty of every equation we've ever used to describe the universe. For a number of years now, artists sensitive to this issue have worked to demystify representation's formal authority, scrutinizing the borders between ideological and factual content, universal and personal experience, between self-identity or self-expression and those expressions and identities determined by larger cultural conditions. In fact, the critical examination, exposure, and tactical repositioning of the prevalent images, seductive myths, and subliminal messages within media culture and art history provide perhaps the characteristic note in the voice of current art. But this is not exactly what Barbara Ess does. Ess is no less aware of the preexisting lies perpetrated and perpetuated within our dehumanized social architecture than other, explicitly critical artists. Rather than address these falsities directly, however, she draws our attention to the intense primal emotions and experiences that exist like brittle moments of truth even within the world of simulation. She reveals the abrupt, jagged shards of brief and incomplete revelation, distressed, distracted, and episodic fragments of broken-down communication, and little pockets of nearly forgotten residual memory trapped under the frustrations and delusions of our repressive security blanket. And she does this through photography—the primary vehicle of contemporary culture's implicitly ideological efforts to convey the facts of the world. In their assertion of the priority of subjective experience over any claim to objective vision, Ess' images are perhaps farther outside the status quo of image-making than are the works of many apparently more radicalized artists.

What Ess gives us is never so much the illustration of an idea as a tracing of the space around it, or of its metaphoric equivalent, all caught in the tense abstraction of an image between enigma and ellipse. Blurred, disfigured, and insubstantial, her capsular attenuations of space and time impose their microcosmic view on us in an impressively larger-than-life scale. Their demeanor is both voluptuous and swollen, and if they made a sound it would be a kind of whispering hiss at once grating and seductive. The central meanings of these staged and stylized compositions lie not in what they actually describe but in the manner and texture of their remarks. "Truth" here is submerged within the tangent of "topic," interred in the photographs' thick, rich, saturated, resonant color, a monochromatic shroud that filters each image as if through some space of the mind. Although the pictures may initially seem a strange, unclear, unreal kind of representation, their vague and evocative forms eventually do emerge somehow as cohesive images, which, though peculiar in subject, coloring, and distortion, make their own sense. The introspective personal tone and spiritual quality of the work lie outside the literal values of straight photography. Meaning reveals itself here at no single point of the viewer's participation but only through a gradual process of visual and emotional meditation, a continuous juggling of responses to stimuli both external (the image) and internal (the free-associating imagination). The metamorphic evolution of our relationship with these photographs may thus go from the incomprehension we feel when faced with apparent nonmeaning, through a recognition of the work's physical forms as elements photographically rendered in such a way as to appear abstract and obscure, to comprehension of a psychological reality captured in the picture as a truth unto itself.



Distortion in these images is a direct result of Ess' particular photographic medium. The way the space curves and blurs at its edges, where the image dissolves and fades to black, is inherent in the pinhole camera that Ess uses. Pinhole photography is the perfect device for Ess in its condensation of perspective, its confinement of space in a wraparound that doesn't let us view the world beyond it, and in the way it gives everything a sense of psychologically charged perception. It is also a conceptually clever subtext to this artist's interest in primary, personal experience. This is the original means of photographic invention, after all, the most primitive form of camera. A box with a tiny hole through which images pass in a tight beam of light, it is so basic in its perception that it sets no lens between the source and its depiction.

During the late '70s, when Ess was still actively involved in music (her most notable band being Y Pants) and was engaged in the New York postpunk, art-rock, alternative-club-scene energy and sensibility, her photos were a clearer record of personal and social interactions. At one time her pictures had a snapshot-portrait immediacy and spontaneity recalling Nan Goldin's photography: typically, two figures involved in the domestic, psychosexual implications of being a "couple" were seen in still, private moments of unposed and unconscious gesture, glance, or posture that revealed the tension in their involvements with one another and with their environment. Even this work, however, was as allegorical as it was representational, and far less concerned with formalist composition than with issues of conceptual content or visionary metaphor. Ess' view has not shifted in beliefs or perceptions but rather has transplanted itself onto successive levels of increasingly less empirical and more psychological trajectory. Her work of 1989–90 must thus be understood as a continuous extension and expansion of her earlier pictures, mining regions even farther underneath the surface of things to find the essence of experience that exists inside insight.

Unlike earlier work such as the “Food for the Moon” and “Ecstasy” series, 1986 and 1982–88 respectively, Ess’ latest photographs were not conceived to operate together as a cohesive group, but their shared ideas and feelings make it easy to think of them as a single body of work. Considering them, then, within the parenthetical context of how they might constitute a specific period in the larger framework of Ess’ creative development, it’s possible to see certain similarities in their subjects, as well as a consistent or recurring emotional dynamic in the way the artist relates to the issues she raises. As in much of Ess’ photography prior to this, the images reveal a deeply embedded psychic axis of enclosure and exclusion around which everything seems to orbit, suggesting a balance between the tame and secure indoor life and the uncultivated and alienated outside. A carefully manicured plant trained along a picket fence is the subject we may eventually make out in one of these works. In the gentle glow and glory of a quiet summer afternoon, its flowers hang aimlessly in bursts of ripe satiety between the fence’s slats, suspended there in precious repose like puffed-up aromatic clouds floating in a warm, comatose haze. In another recent work Ess has photographed a wall in winter, its surface covered by a clinging lattice of leafless vines, so that the image impersonates an endless labyrinth of tiny cracks. An artificial architectural imposition receives an organic reticulation.

Fence and wall in these pictures are not accidental reminders of the way we continually split up space into hierarchies of in and out. Ess is interested in the claustrophobic containment, concealment, and aggressive privatization of every part and parcel of existence save a few narrow strips on which we commute. The fence in particular is a purely metaphoric border—a marker of space accepted as a signifier of “no trespassing” by a society that does not question the right of ownership and exclusive domain. The juxtaposition in these works of the vegetal and the manmade is a contrast and hybridization of humanity and nature, a direct opposition of chaos, wilderness, freedom, and life against the rational, tame, restricted, inorganic, and mediated. Ess may situate this dichotomy outdoors, in, for example, an image looking upward through blurred swirling foliage into a rambling, out-of-bounds nature that encloses us in a rapturous summer idyll as it rushes past our eyes, like some vague memory recovered in a waking sleep. Or she may find it inside, photographing a stuffed and mounted ram’s head that looks directly at us and smiles with a Mona Lisa–like ambiguity.

Ess’ vision of reality is set firmly in the realm of the senses, or even the extra senses. Though objects like the ram’s head are easy enough to identify, just as often she avoids recognizably referential images, exposing basically simple and familiar fragments of ordinary life to an obtuse syntax of mannerist, allegorical, symbolist, and impressionist ciphers. The images navigate the osmotic plane between meanings. Dilations of circumstance that oppose their own provenance within the system of photography, they are almost always untitled, leaving their field of suggestion broad and inclusive yet opaque. This field is diaphanous and fluxional. It is as if one’s memory were heightened, drawing up fragments of views one wouldn’t ordinarily recall that one had ever seen, but pulling them out of any context that would identify them. The photographs relay an emotional involvement far beyond the ordinary associations attached to the inventory of imagery that they represent (as a pictorial fiction) and record (through the science of photography). They are projected approximations of an experience that must be magnified even to register, for its traces remain only in a region of insubstantial impression where remote feelings and ideas dwell on the periphery of sensory perception and cognitive understanding.

The idea of giving titles to Ess' works, or even of trying to describe them, shows clearly just how fragile and delicate is the balance of subtlety, fluidity, multiplicity, and intimacy in which her provocative ambivalences conspire. Ess maintains a dynamic among barely compatible positions that often tend to deny each other, and their involvements and interactions within her esthetic are far more complex than they immediately appear. She has somehow managed to deposit in her most recent work a simultaneous array of emotionally double-edged and volatile responses—attraction and revulsion, desire and dread, involvement and alienation, containment and hysteria, security and claustrophobia, vulnerability and strength. The convergence of these conflicting qualities within a single, relatively uncrowded picture is remarkable. No one emotion upsets the equilibrium of the work, nor is the tension allowed to lapse into any trap of compromise or easy resolution. Neither is the coexistence maintained by adopting the inflections of cynicism, superficiality, or insensitivity. Essential to her success in this is that while the troubling emotional and ideological pressure within her work infuses the pictures with highly charged psychological undercurrents of restlessness and morbid sorrow, the simple and familiar subject matter prevents these schizophrenic forces from erupting in ideological overstatements or emotional melodramatics. This is the real brilliance of the partnership between the subjectively loaded subtext and the reduced visual syntax of Ess' art: their combination in a seamless frame where they conjure their entirely new, disturbing revisions of everyday experience into a strange and plangent space of the mind.

In some peculiar way, Ess seems to follow in the tradition of 19th-century English women novelists such as Jane Austen and the Brontë sisters, who similarly transfigured minor bits of fiction into fascinating narratives that expose every aspect of existence to the personal sympathies, humanist observations, passionate obsessions, and sharp social satirizations of the artists' creative intellect. Ess measures the cumulative effects of the routine world on the turbulence, hypersensitivity, and epic exaggeration of the imagination. Her ability to observe the subtle shapes of violence, madness, dependency, and inertia, intimately evoked from the trifling details of civilization, locates for us those sites of overcultivation whose landmarks, customs, and assumptions appear so commonplace, so generic and lifelessly predictable, that their configuration of discrete oppression is habitually overlooked. Because Ess doesn't make art about the faults, fallacies, and failures she may find in the currencies of fiction or truth that circulate within contemporary culture, it may not be evident how subversive her elevation of subjectivity is in relation to conventional, rational conceptions of reality as a set of empirically verifiable facts. By emphasizing the extremely relative nature of perception, its dependence on the emotional disposition of the viewer (which may shift at any moment, or, on the other hand, may be predetermined by memories and associations having nothing to do with the image being viewed), Ess suggests that individual thoughts and feelings have a truth far deeper than the code of objectivity that reason asserts as law. The rejection of objectivity implicit in this art is more than a token transgression. The perception of reality can only be subjective, Ess maintains, because there can be no such thing as objectivity in a world that is mediated through and by the observer. She reminds us that the only thing we will ever really have or know is our own experience of the truth.

Carlo McCormick lives in New York and writes regularly for Artforum. He is associate editor of The Paper.