

Barbara Ess: *Inside Out*

March 9–April 22, 2023

Opening Reception: Thursday, March 9, 6–8 PM

Level One

Magenta Plains is pleased to present *Inside Out*, the first posthumous solo exhibition of Barbara Ess' work, focusing on a selection of her celebrated pinhole photographs from the 1980s and 1990s. The intimacy central to Ess' photographic practice (an aspect that reverberates throughout all of the work she produced across more than four decades) resonates today in a moment where isolation and uncertainty about the boundaries of our reality are pervasive concerns in the daily discourse. The photographs on view represent the last extant editions of these crucial works.

Inside Out is a celebration of Barbara Ess' impressive repertoire with a deceptively simple photographic tool: the pinhole camera. Amidst the chaos and energy of downtown New York in the 1980s and '90s, Ess was constructing DIY cameras out of cardboard, and through them seeing into the eddies and ripples of the most nuanced human experiences. The works included in this exhibition are representative of the remarkable range she was able to achieve using only this homemade apparatus, and the emotional depths she was able to plumb with the vision it afforded her. This medium allowed her a more direct engagement with her subjects while also indicating Ess' conflicted relationship with photography itself, a conflict that consumed her all her life.

Perhaps one of the most important dimensions of Ess' multivalent artistic concern was the porous division between the human experience of interiority and one's perception of the outside world. The Cartesian paradigm at the center of her work finds its expression here through Ess' careful looking at intimate moments between others, intense self-portraiture, and hazy depictions of the natural world and our built environment. In all of these photographs a profound sense of vulnerability comes through the lens-less camera, emphasizing the frailty of our experiential perception and the ethereal beauty of the world we have built. These shadowy, duo-toned prints recall the early days of photography, simultaneously carrying the medium's entire history while also shedding themselves of it.

Furthermore, this selection of photographs encompasses a crucial period in Ess' career, in which these timeless images were achieving national and international recognition beyond her already well-established career in New York. Some of these very same photographs were shown at the High Museum of Art in 1992, the Queens Museum of Art in 1993, the Fundacion la Caixa in Barcelona in 1994, and published in *Barbara Ess I Am Not This Body* (Aperture, 2001). This was complimented by regular exhibitions with Curt Marcus Gallery in New York, broadening the reach and appeal of her singular image-making practice.

"Ess works in a gap between the out-there of the world and the in-here of the mind, not to heal the gap but, for truth's sake, precisely to widen it. She thereby establishes a zone congenial to honest speculations of intelligence and to test-firings of the heat-seeking missile of the heart."

–Peter Schjeldahl

Coinciding with this exhibition is the release of the new chapbook, *Barbara Ess Fragments*, a collection of writing selected from Ess' notebooks dated 2014–2020, edited by Adam Marnie and published by F, Houston, in an edition of 200. Copies will be available at the gallery for \$15.

Barbara Ess (b. 1944, Brooklyn, NY, d. 2021, Elizaville, NY) 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+Schöttle, 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/Musée 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.