



# BARBARA ESS

# MAGENTA PLAINS

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 has 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 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+Sch ttle, 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 has been 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/Musee d'Art Moderne, and Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, TX. Barbara Ess lives and works in New York City. She is an Associate Professor of Photography at Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson.

94 Allen St.

New York, NY 10002

[www.magentaplains.com](http://www.magentaplains.com)

917-388-2464

*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](http://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*

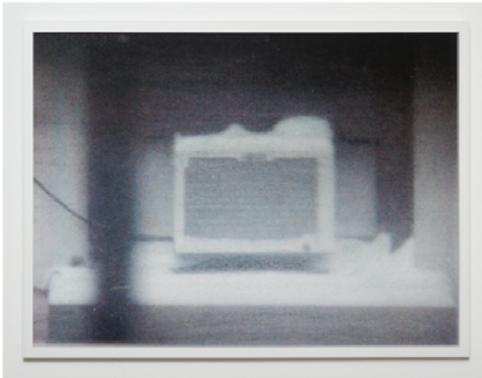
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Artforum

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

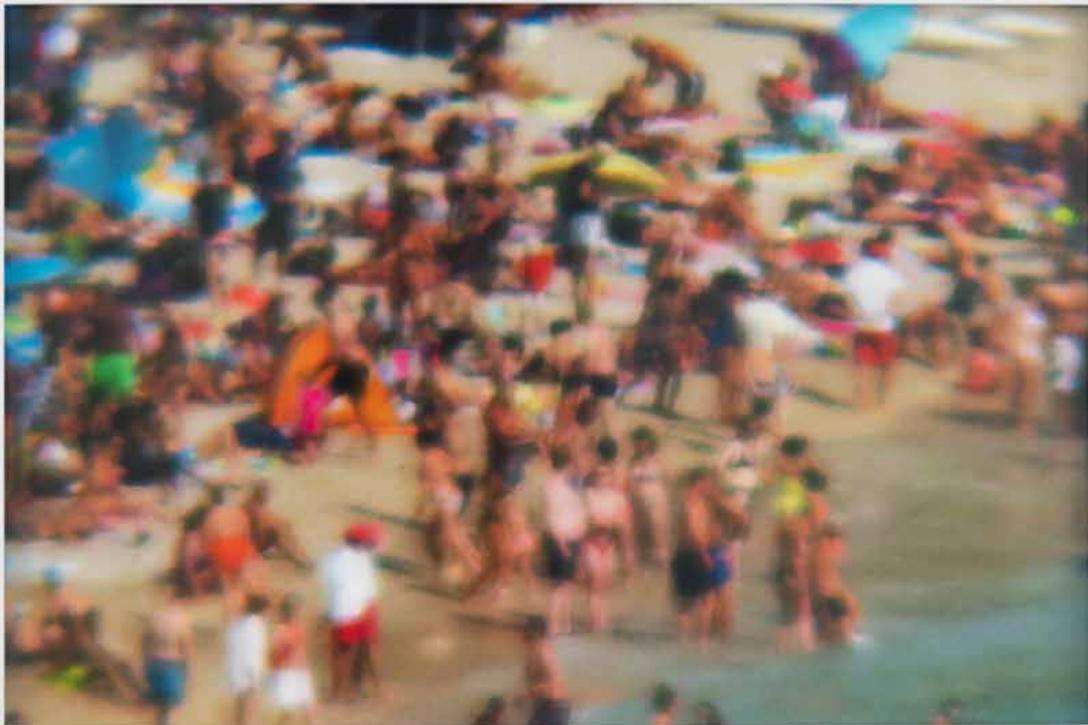
Critics'  
Guides /



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.

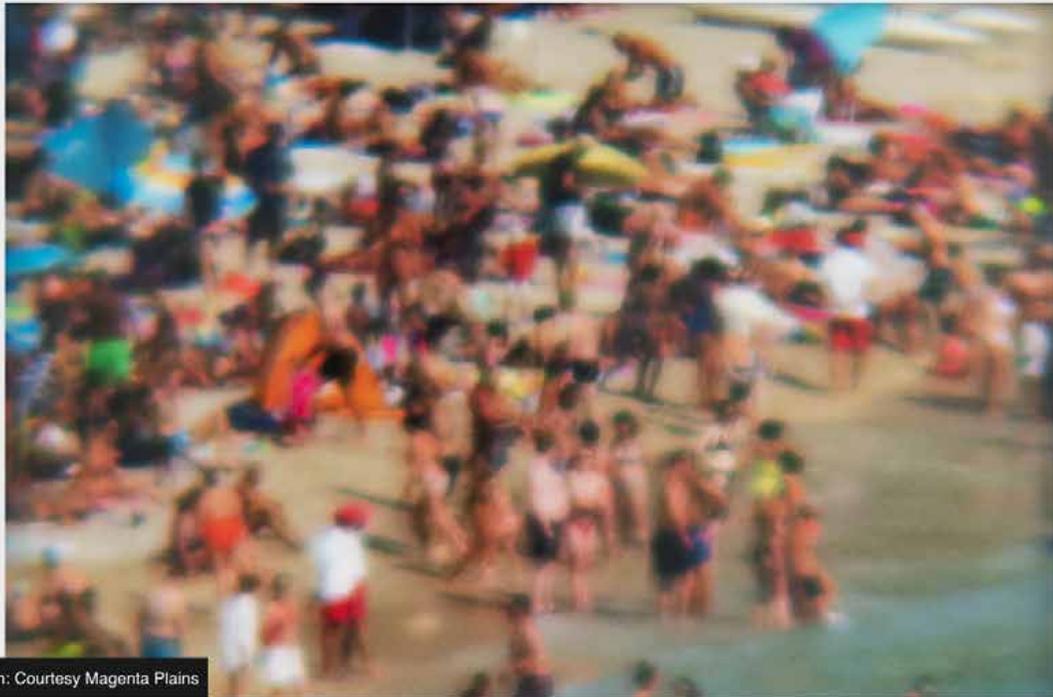
Time Out New York

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

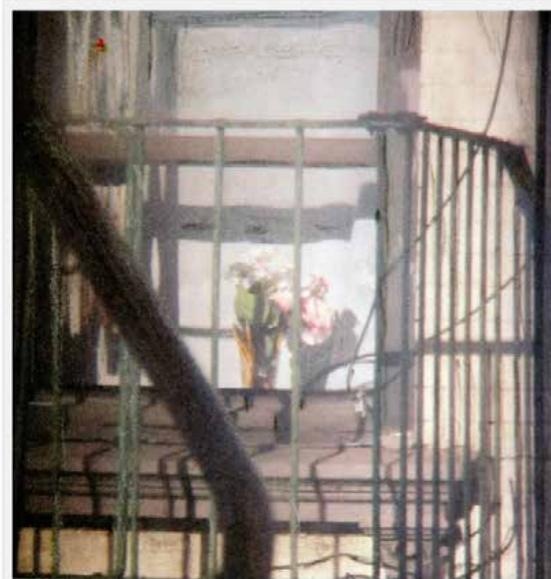
# filthy dreams

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.



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)

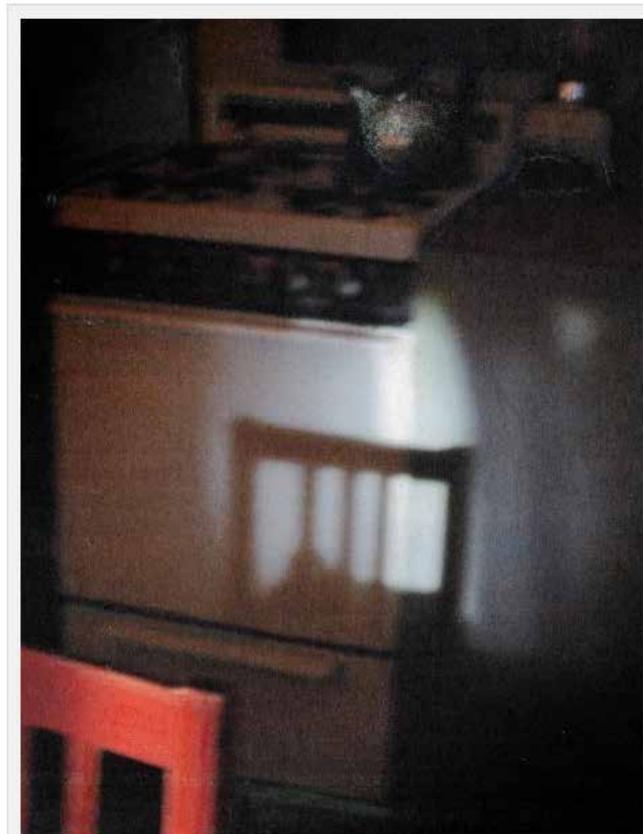
The prints from the *Surveillance* series are painterly. The poor image quality brings a haunting abstraction to almost uncannily mundane scenarios. *Wild Horses* (2010), for instance, finds a lineup of horses illuminated by a spare infrared light, and depicted as whitewashed silhouettes against a desolate 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.



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

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.

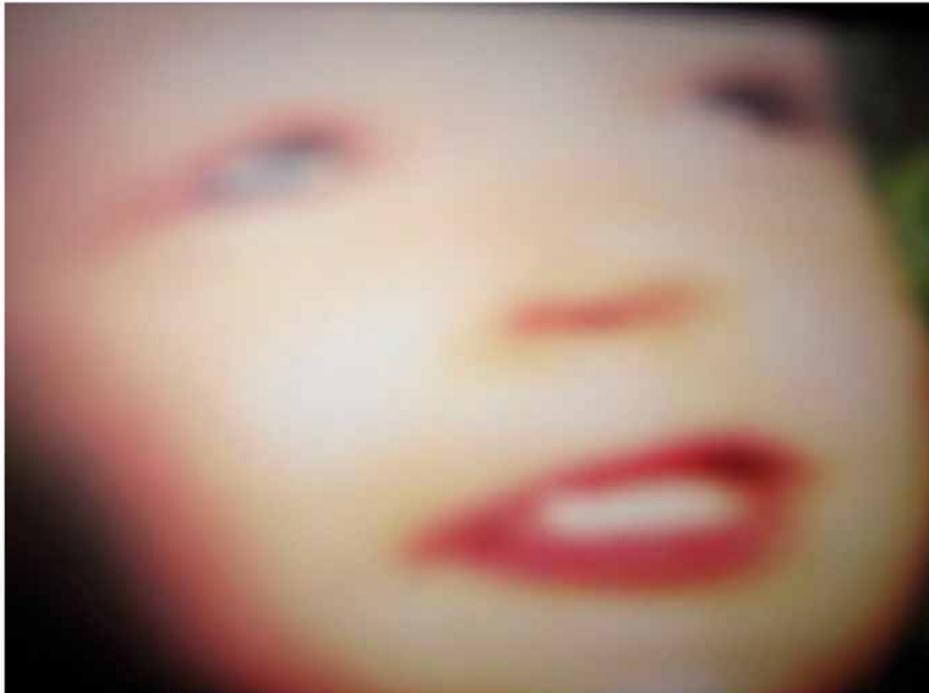
Like experimental film, Ess's work presents no strict narrative. She exploits lo-fi equipment to achieve her aesthetic. And most importantly, Ess works within limitations, a hallmark quality of classic experimental cinema. Soviet film theorist Lev Kuleshov said that film viewers tend to derive meaning 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**

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**ARTS**

### ***ART GUIDE***

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JUNE 11, 2004

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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***

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By GRACE GLUECK MAY 1, 1998

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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