



NEWWORKS

by Karen Wilkin

When Frances Barth first forged her identity as a painter, the most adventurous American abstraction was bound up with notions of refusal and sparseness. As if in response to the reading of modernism as each medium's jettisoning whatever was not intrinsic to it, Color Field painters and Minimalists alike rejected not only illusionism and narrative but also physical density and (often) complexity of scale and internal relationships in favor of generous, lucid, disembodied structures. Barth's own early abstractions, which established her as an artist to be reckoned with, were about the evocative power of large, thin expanses of uninflected color – restrained, amply proportioned, geometric compositions of surprising hues orchestrated for maximum expression.

Today, decades later, Barth's accomplished mature paintings can be characterized, largely, much in the same way as her early works. Her present-day, still radical abstractions can be described in terms of their lush combinations of unnamable colors, their eloquent

economy, and their graphic clarity. Her most recent paintings, whether large or small, are among her most expansive and pared-down to date, as well as among her most radiant and chromatically unpredictable, and her most spatially provocative and ambiguous. What's new is that, unlike her earlier works, Barth's recent paintings, despite their evident dependence on the drama that can be elicited from forthright relationships of uninflected hues and clearly defined shapes, are also notable for their startling variety of what might be called drawing incidents, from impossibly delicate lines to bold strokes. And they are also notable for their richness and complexity – of scales, of reference, of allusions, and of pictorial languages – so much so that it's not an overstatement to say that they suggest new possibilities for what abstract painting can encompass in the first part of the 21st century.

This combination of contradictory qualities is not surprising. The fiercely intelligent, exacting, articulate Barth is a polymath whose

curiosity has led her to investigate deeply a broad spectrum of unlikely fields, from geology to architectural drafting to computer animation and more, all of which have resonance, however improbable, in her paintings. She’s an intensely thoughtful, rigorous painter with a thorough knowledge of past and present art, armed with a keen sense of the absurd and the witty, attributes that also find their way into her work. It’s typical, for example, that Barth refers to one recent painting, distinguished by combination of pale, chalky, fresco-like color and muscular, albeit non-specific imagery, as “Piero della Francesca meets Philip Guston.” In studio conversations, she is apt to speak of the paradoxical challenges she sets for herself, the apparently impossible tasks that, against all odds, she has accomplished without effort – or so it seems – in her recent work. (More about that contradiction later.) Barth speaks of having always been “very influenced by the argument between Delacroix and Ingres, the question of whether you’re a painter or a ‘draw-er.’ I want to be both.” She speaks, too, of “telling myself stories when I paint” and of “wanting to tell stories without words,” her obvious commitment to abstraction notwithstanding. And, more particularly, she speaks of “the tension between local color and abstract color”

and of wanting “big areas of ungracious color – chemical color that doesn’t exist in nature – to open up like the sky but not be sky.”

The wordless narratives in Barth’s recent paintings are usually “journeys” through convincing fictive spaces that she invokes with purely two-dimensional means: sharply defined shapes of relatively flat color and incidents of various sizes. As we visually move through this two-dimensional “landscape,” we become aware of the instability of the terrain before us. Disjunctive spatial shifts interrupt our progress, yet this illusionism proves to be less the result of specific elements in Barth’s paintings than a construct created by our entrenched habits of interpreting particular shapes and relationships of shapes as allusions to our perception of the three-dimensional world we inhabit. A flatly painted rhombus, cropped by the edge of the canvas, for example, can pulse between the foreshortening of perspectival reference and declarative affirmation of the literal surface of the canvas, with a nod at the non-perspectival but potent spatial conventions of Japanese screen paintings – among other things. There is nothing tricky or artful about these shifts. Barth’s dislocations could be compared with the poetics of Mannerist space

– paintings in which an enormous Madonna and Child loom in the foreground, while a tiny prophet bears witness from some “other,” unspecified distance, close, in terms of the two-dimensional structure of the composition, but infinitely far, in terms of scale relations. As viewers of Barth’s paintings, we are displaced, pushed into an unstable limbo in which we enjoy a kind of omnipotence, roaming through boundless spaces, hovering over vast distances, or facing down looming landmasses, at the very same time that we are compelled to address the fact of her large sheets of color, clearly bounded stretches of exquisitely refined pigment that forcibly remind us of the artifice of painting. Barth herself might call these ambiguous passages zones that “open up like the sky but are not the sky” – apparently unbounded distances or confrontational forms evocative of the natural world that also insist on being acknowledged as flat, artist-made passages of luminous “chemical” hues.

These ambiguities are reinforced by Barth’s large vocabulary of marks and lines, which includes everything from the brushy and coarse to the achingly disciplined and fragile, and provokes a multiplicity of associations. She deploys, among other things, a range of schematic

codes, both universally accepted and personal, that refer to geologic formations and building materials, and adopts, too, a host of allusions to mapping, a lexicon of grids of various dimensions and densities, plus hatchings, scratchings, and tremulous lines of such extreme delicacy that it seems impossible for them to sustain themselves across her long, horizontal canvases or even across her more rationally proportioned small rectangles. Barth’s drawing emphasizes the spatial instabilities established by her large scale structures of color. We gaze into the dissolving space of a broad plane of pale astringent yellow or milky grey and are returned to the surface of the canvas by assertively stroked grids or sharply defined, hard-to-classify stenciled configurations. If these elusive “signs” move us into the realm of the practical, reminding us of functional systems and means of symbolic communication, other elements – bare-bones, building-like “structures,” for example – pull us firmly back into the history of art, hinting, in their scale relationships and tenuous spatial references, at the symbolic landscape settings and emblematic architecture of early Renaissance painting. Barth’s multivalent drawn “language” further destabilizes us, as viewers, by suggesting that we are not only constantly changing our distance

from her fleeting suggested “images” – the rocky ledges, the chasms, the “structures,” but that we are also altering our spatial orientation. Now we creep, ant-like, over an enormous formation; now we tower above a miniature incident; now we levitate to a great distance; now we are embedded in Barth’s fictive universe. The logic of scale relationships erodes, replaced by a fluid open-endedness that suggests limitless possibilities rather than, as in traditional representations, a single immutable moment. “I’d like to make things appear to exist in different times,” Barth says. “There’s no one version of reality. We can do different things at different times in the same place. Thinking about that gives me greater range.”

The authority and assertiveness of Barth’s recent paintings leave no doubt about how well she rises to her self-imposed challenges, yet the apparent spontaneity of these works is deceptive. “They have to get to the point where they look as if they just happened,” Barth says, “but they don’t just happen.” In fact, they are extraordinarily carefully wrought pictures. Airy, transparent, or opaque surfaces for all their freshness, are the result of attentive and sometimes prolonged revisions, calculated to achieve the appearance of

immediacy. The dynamic equilibrium of colors that so distinguishes these pictures is established without repetitions, through hard-won but seemingly improvisatory adjustments of nuance, intensity, value, and hue. Barth’s exploitation of an arsenal of marks, her reveling in the differences between crisp, near-mechanical lines and tremulous hand-drawn ones, requires her to use with equal facility razor sharp colored pencils, unnervingly delicate stencils (which she laboriously cuts herself), and occasionally, in unconventional ways, her grandfather’s drafting instruments, brought with him as an immigrant from Europe. The subtly varied linear elements that this range of tools permits are played against equally subtle, equally varied expanses of color – washy, velvety, or almost anonymous – that intensify the tension that Barth sets up between visible evidence of her hand and the suppression of that evidence.

Important as Barth’s orchestration of these small distinctions is to the cumulative meaning of her paintings, our awareness of them alters according to how close we are to her paintings. No one viewpoint reveals everything we need to know. If the spatial instability of Barth’s images implies a variety of metaphorical locations for the viewer –

above, before, within, below – real changes in our viewing distance lead to very different perceptions of what we are looking at. When we encounter Barth’s recent works from across the room, we can be engaged by the large scale structure of big color shapes; come close, and we discover a host of small scale, intimate incidents. Such multiplicity of scales is something we associate less with late 20th century (and early 21st century) abstraction – which is often stripped-down, singular, and graphic – than we do with traditional illusionistic painting – which is usually full of significant details, subservient to larger compositional events, that become visible only from close viewing. Barth’s paintings, their essential abstractness notwithstanding, like the paintings of the past she admires, demand and reward different readings from different distances.

All of these subtleties and layerings are important aspects of Barth’s recent paintings, but at their simplest level, they are just plain beautiful, with their ravishing surfaces, intricate drawing, and, above all, delectable, sometimes astringent, always surprising color. Part of the fascination of Barth’s palette is its ability to trigger potent associations with real experience despite its independence

from local color. Barth’s hues are almost always invented. They don’t exist in nature but become metaphors for our experience of the natural world, just as her invented spatial “landscapes” become metaphors for our experience of familiar places. Barth sometimes refers to presence of beautiful, harmonious, and alluring elements in her work as its “gracious” aspect. She is equally interested in the opposite qualities that she evokes, sometimes simultaneously. “I want to make paintings that keep making you renegotiate this graciousness,” Barth says. “You get relief, but you have to work for it.” Barth’s recent paintings insist that we put in the work of exploring their slowly revealed complexities. When we do, we receive not just “relief,” as the painter suggests, but a wonderful combination of sensual and intellectual engagement. That’s a lot.