

# FRANCES BARTH

## PAINTINGS

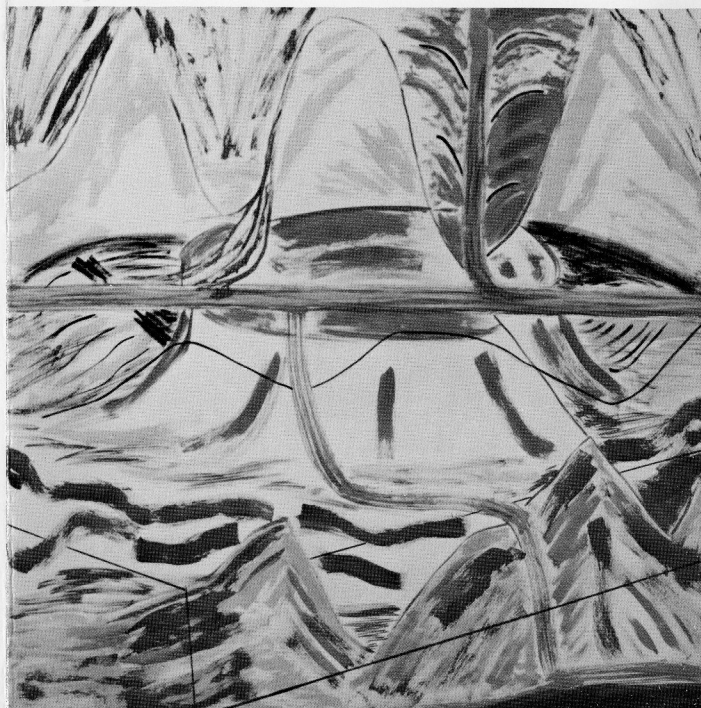
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by Marjorie Welsh

If scenography could loiter in the wings and in the flies of stage space, dreaming of topography, it might conceive of such space as Frances Barth creates in her recent paintings.

*On the Edge of Fable* is the most ambitious spatial inscape in her current show. For this Barth has used acrylic and pastel to sketch an imaginary crater, ocean and mountain range that are not so much generic as universal and intuited, and these ABCs of landscape merge with rhythms in space at once modern and folkloric. Down the surface of the canvas delineated sepia rivers run, and giant schematic leaves rest in the gaps left by the mountain range. Sandwiched between these intuited perspectives in surface and depth is a rendering of isometric space, or, if you prefer, a drawing of pre-Renaissance perspective unauthorized by the Florentines. Wherever we look in the hope of reconciling these distinct viewpoints into one tidy perspective, complexity reigns. Complexity of spatial conception is indeed what carries this composition beyond the easy-to-read formulas found in decor.

Whenever the Symbolists embarked on their decorative sojourns into fable, they too encountered a complexity of faith they had not bargained for. Where we begin our tales "Once upon a time," the Tahitians say, "What of this is truth? What of this is not truth?" Gauguin, who fled to Tahiti from European bourgeois life in search of truth, discovered that Polynesian truths were not at all simple, certainly not in the way fantasized by his European mind. In pursuit of simplicity, this French exile instead found languorous yet freighted impassivity, he became convinced that the relaxed basics of



*On the Edge of Fable*, 1988, ac/canvas, 80" x 80"

line, color and space, however they might seem visually reductive, ultimately articulate a troubling and elusive world. In some of Gauguin's art, "once upon a time" indeed approaches the condition of metaphysical question.

For her part, it is as if Barth were attempting a rapprochement with Symbolism. If many of her paintings owe their discontinuous fluidity of line and space to Synthetic Cubism (again and again Picasso's Matisse-indebted image of Marie-Thérèse sleeping seems to inform Barth's somnolent floral structures), this modern style also invites into its precinct the Symbolist idea that the decorative in art is really a vehicle for feeling. In this show, drawing, not color, is Barth's artistic tool, and the few objects she introduces are no more than notations, notations which, through their very formal poverty, could be signs for deep trauma—or for nothing in particular. Whether they are one or the other depends on Barth's finessed touch, placement, and her scale of assembly. How to turn decor into a

scrim for daydream or story is something that Barth has experimented with in her set designs for dance. If her paintings finally remain poised on the verge of fable, however, it is because an underlying rationality derived from Cubism governs Barth's Symbolist impulses.

In Barth's several diptychs images exist in obvious opposition; land and sea are constant companions in these level-headed canvases. Of the more complex approaches to duality, *Gate* is perhaps the best. Subordinating the elements of earth and water under the terms of cultivated and uncultivated nature, it shows, on the left, a walled garden including a scheme for, as the artist says, "the first irrigation system," while on the right is a gate leading to a fountain and, beyond it, the wide world. Looking down on this pair of angled, loosely isometric spaces, we sense an image of "nature on a table, presenting something not quite in our grasp." Another work that seems a schematic model of the intuited world is *Arcady*. Strictly speaking not a diptych, this painting traces a kind of interiorized diorama divided laterally across the center into perfectly satisfying desert and marine halves.

The problem Barth has set herself in painting is to explore the indeterminate region between decor and decoration—decor, which is expedient, and decoration, which for all appearances may resemble decor, yet, as the artist puts it, "slows down perception." It is a tantalizing and paradoxical problem. For there is a world of difference between design-to-snooze-by and design at ease with itself that through its half-closed lids insinuates intelligence. These forms are a universe apart, yet a hairsbreadth may distinguish them.

In Barth's large canvases, slowing down perception has worked to advance her decorative project: the quick "read" upon which decor depends gives way to perception that must cope with several spatial systems presented at once—and the mind-set expands to comprehend all this. The viewer's glance is also slowed by the paintings' studious, even grave emotional tone. Finally, the glance also must cope with the perturbation of decor through Barth's shy and unsettled impulse toward an introspective decorative art. Like the fable of the pine tree that longs to be a tree of glass, the paintings of Frances Barth work as painting by offering up the yearning of decor to play another, grander artistic role. □