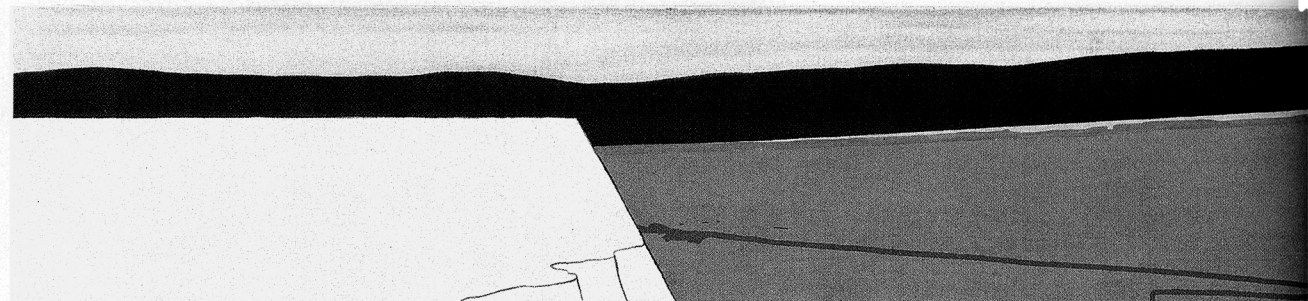


Barth Ranges Wide

BY KAREN WILKIN



“I tell myself stories when I paint,” Frances Barth says. It’s a surprising revelation from an artist whose reputation was established, in the 1970s, by abstract canvases that refuse to be about anything but themselves—about how radiant colors meet, how expanses jostle for dominance, how enormous, assertive surfaces can confront the viewer. Yet Barth’s recent work makes her admission not only less surprising but also essential to understanding her aspirations. The combination of intellect and sensuality with which she first announced herself remains unchanged. Luminous hues, subtle surfaces and disorienting scale are still key components in her pictures. So is the declarative “presentness” that has long been a hallmark of her work, in unsettling combination with a taste for extremes, and with the straightforward conviction that a painting is a meticulously made rumination on the history of its own evolution and the history of art. But for the past 15 years or so, Barth has been making pictures as memorable for their tantalizing imagery as for their spatial complexity, odd color or forthrightness. “I received a lot of attention for my earlier works,” Barth says, “but I couldn’t make them any more. I was interested in a lot of different things and I wanted to see if you could make an abstract painting that also had a narrative.”

Both the evolution and constancy of Barth’s concerns were evident in a small survey of her work from the late 1990s to the present, seen last summer at the Jaffe-Friede & Strauss Galleries, Dartmouth College, and recently, in a slightly altered version, at the New York Studio School Gallery. It’s difficult to say what hit most powerfully at first viewing: the unpredictable, chalky colors, the delicate touch, or the exaggerated proportions of the canvases, which ranged from elongated horizontals, such

as *tender b* (2005), which is 10 inches high and 8 feet wide, to intimate little near-squares such as *wt-g* (2006), which is 14 by 15 inches. Whether achingly extended or primly contained, all the paintings share vertiginous, shifting spaces that at once invite us to enter, metaphorically, and deny us a secure vantage point. Barth’s space seems to expand and contract, tipping towards us and retreating, so that we are never certain if we are standing on the edge of a precipice, flying high above a plain, attempting to cross at ground level or nestled in a cleft of rock.

Like Gulliver, traveling from Lilliput to Brobdingnag, or Alice, nibbling on the size-altering mushroom, Barth makes us perceive ourselves simultaneously as omnipotent giants surveying a miniaturized world and as insignificant creatures overwhelmed by the infinite. Is the exquisitely delicate red drawing on a rectangular slab in the monumental *Putnam* (2003)

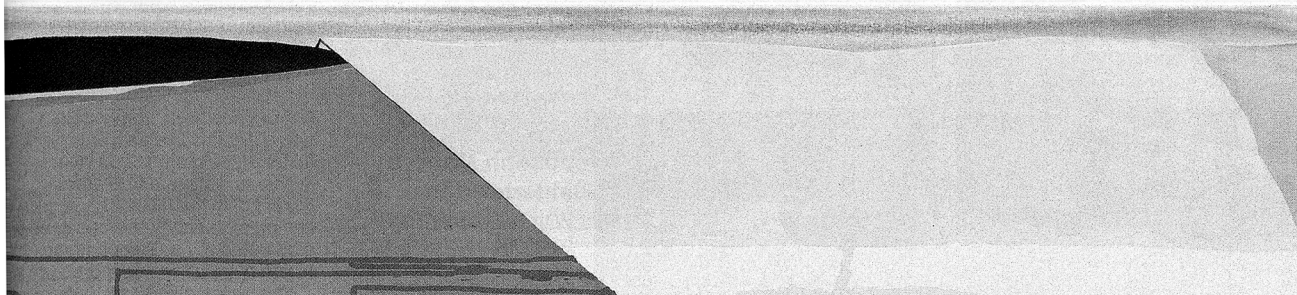
a conceptualized, reduced version of an immense geological formation—a drainage basin, for example—or is it an enlargement of something small and otherwise overlooked—cracks in dry earth or, perhaps, the magnified irregularities of skin? Are the slim, perspectively depicted blocks of *ptol.B* (2003) close-up allusions to the built environment, enlarged for drama, or quotations from the schematically rendered strata of geology textbooks? Is the space the “bricks” momentarily define by their shadow located at our feet or is it boundless?

Occasionally, especially in the small squarish paintings, Barth brings us in close, focusing on a particular phenomenon without forfeiting ambiguity, so that we are unsure if we are faced with, say, tectonic plates meeting or a neglected corner between wall and pavement. But for the most part, the



pedestal, 2005, acrylic on panel, 14 by 15 inches.

Luminous hues and disorienting scale still characterize Frances Barth's paintings, which now also feature exaggeratedly horizontal formats and hints of landscape. A recent survey traveled from Dartmouth to the New York Studio School.



Frances Barth: tender b, 2005, acrylic on canvas 10 by 96 inches.
All photos Manu Sassoonian, courtesy Sundaram Tagore Gallery, New York.

elastic, slipping spaces in Barth's recent works seem enormous and ungraspable, their scale as hard to read as the unpunctuated white expanses in photographs of Antarctica, in which mountains 80 miles distant appear to be a short stroll away and small objects in the foreground loom like houses. What is constant is that Barth's images are both convincing and unnamable.

It is also a constant that her mysterious terrain is resolutely unpopulated. Barth's crisp drawing, manifested as independent lines of great refinement and the edges of stenciled shapes, combines with her delicate, restrained surfaces to suggest a kind of anonymity. While we are always aware (as we were in her early abstractions) of the materiality and artifice of paint, her recent paintings are also reminiscent of scientific diagrams that reduce immensely complicated and irregular phenomena to comprehensible, tidy schemata. We imagine ourselves entering and exploring the fictive spaces of Barth's otherworldly "landscapes" but the conceit remains oddly disembodied, since she provides no surrogate figures for us to inhabit mentally. Instead, we are confronted by the fact of painting, with its multiplicity of associations and readings.

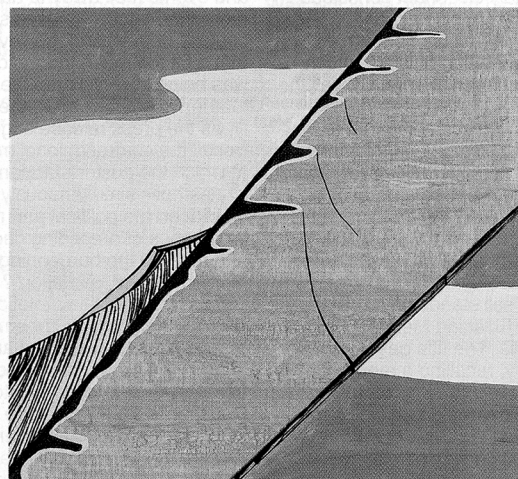
A statement in the catalogue for an exhibition of Barth's work from the 1990s provides a clue to her concerns, and reminds us that at one point she studied (among many other things) geology. "Sedimentary structures, desiccation, cross-cutting relationships, alternately wet and dry environments create natural formations and sequences that narrate the story of a place over geological time. It is visually all around us to be seen and apprehended, and is one of the motivating forces in my painting."

Yet this sounds more dispassionate than Barth's paintings prove to be. Despite their restraint, they are powerfully sensual, with their velvety surfaces and radiant, "off" hues. Just as Barth suggests particular spaces without depicting them, she deploys colors—creamy grays, weird lilacs, celadon greens, pale apricots—that evoke, but don't specify, conditions of light, time and place. Yet none of this obviates the cerebral qualities of Barth's paintings, which make visible the thought processes of a fiercely intelligent artist—and one with a wry sense of humor. (For example, she describes the enigmatic image in the small, off-square *pedestal* of 2005 as "that Saarinen table base that was everywhere in the 1970s holding up

the world.") Barth is a passionate painter and a hard worker—that she essentially turned herself into an architect to transform a derelict factory building into her studio is typical—whose eclectic skills have found their way into her ambiguous, beautiful paintings. Like her early works, the new ones are richly rewarding as abstractions, but if we pay attention, we can intuit some of the complex, quirky stories Barth tells herself when she paints. □

"Frances Barth: Paintings" was on view at the Jaffe-Friede & Strauss Galleries at Dartmouth College, Hanover, N.H. [June 28-July 25, 2005], and traveled to the New York Studio School [May 18-July 15, 2006]. Barth's work also appeared in a two-person exhibition at the Sundaram Tagore gallery's new Chelsea location [Sept. 16-30].

Author: Karen Wilkin, who teaches at the New York Studio School, is an independent curator and critic.



wt-g, 2006, acrylic on panel, 14 by 15 inches.