

# ARTFORUM

Catherine Wagner: "Catherine Wagner: Los Angeles County Museum of Art"

By Maria Porges

October 1993



Although Catherine Wagner is known for studies of public environments—schools, a World Exposition, a convention center -- her current body of work systematically explores a more intimate terrain, focusing specifically on the American home. In each of the 34 pieces included in this exhibition, three 16-by-20-inch views have been smoothly juxtaposed to create a long horizontal rectangle. These tripartite compositions 'dramatically spotlight in a darkened gallery, present us with large-format views of opulence and simplicity, comfort and chaos, from one end of the country--and the spectrum--to the other, though the artist makes no pretense of complete representation, having selected these interiors in a very arbitrary fashion. Only place and possessions are revealed: the inhabitants, notably absent, are only identified and understood through the environment they have invented for themselves and only by their first names, each of which furnishes the title of a work.

Due to both Wagner's chosen format and her display strategies, these composite images simultaneously suggest the imagery and atmosphere in churches, the diorama displays of a natural history museum, and-- of course--windows, through which we peer voyeuristically. Still, despite the sociocultural significance of these works, their identical size and silvery perfection have an unsettling, somewhat paradoxical effect. Their hypnotic similarity seems at first to make a point about the universality of certain sentimental values and nesting behaviors. Yet, on closer examination, there is no organizing principle behind the selection of these images, in terms of either form or content. Although some threesomes suggest a narrative there is no subject or theme that connects one piece to the next. Many include views of bedrooms or kitchens, collections of family photos or treasured knickknacks. Yet none of these categories is inclusive or controlling. There is no single point of view--except, perhaps: that of the formal rhyming of shapes or elements within a single grouping. Still, it's virtually impossible to construct an interpretation based on the overall structure of the project, as in the typological studies of Bernd and Hilla Becher (to which Wagner clearly refers). The implication here is that despite our need to create a personally meaningful place, our differences make each of these spaces unique. Rather than related forms of the same thing, these homes begin to present themselves as 34 arbitrarily selected species within a virtually unlimited genus.

In a way, what these pictures do have in common is that they are views of the passage of *time*, in a way that most photographs-- as images of a particular, immediately past moment-- are not.

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Although homes do change over the months and years, it is their constancy in memory that comforts and strengthens us. Wagner's photographs of photographs-the many family portraits, as well as the odd accumulations of doodads and whatnots present in so many of these images - are the means by which this metanarrative is suggested. It's not that we really want to make up a story by looking in these windows. It's that we know that such a story exists, even in sparse interiors like Christine T.'s San Francisco home, where a closet contains several cardboard cartons marked "memorabilia."

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