

Photographs by Tina Barney



cover

American, b. 1945
(detail), 2003
from

Chromogenic color print
48 x 60"

Courtesy of Janet Borden, Inc., New York

(detail), 1996

from
Chromogenic color print
40 x 30"

Courtesy of Janet Borden, Inc., New York

These photographic reports, like the verbal ones of Dickens and Wilde, mixed admiration, envy, disappointment, and sheer terror. Henri Cartier-Bresson crisscrossed the United States in 1946 and, despite affection for individuals, found that the vulgar energy of the country as a whole—spared the economic devastation he had witnessed in Europe during and after World War II—presented a troubling model of the future and one to be avoided for France.¹ This low opinion was confirmed by the Swiss émigré Robert Frank, whose acerbic and

encounter had an improvisatory quality, as she sought to orient herself in social situations that were continually surprising and that she had to figure out in a hurry. Once the introductions had been made, the clock started ticking. Barney and her assistants had to survey the pictorial opportunities, and decide on a relative few, before the patience of her subjects ran out.

In important ways, however, Barney's photographs have little in common with the spontaneous ethnography of an alien culture. She has one objective in photography of America: to capture the essence of the American experience. There is no hint of irony or self-reflection or self-doubt in her photographs. Her photographs are made with a large-format camera, of excellent quality, and her subjects are brought to her attention, which can take long minutes and some time to set up.

Nor is she nosy or wide-eyed about her subjects, as was Arbus. Whomever she photographs, Barney's point of view is reliably cool and distanced, never mordant. It is one of social equals. She usually shares with them a high degree of cultural sophistication and material comfort. No one in her portraits looks disadvantaged. They know where their next meal is coming from and probably who will serve it to them. This is decidedly not the Western Europe that has in recent decades accepted record numbers of immigrants from the Eastern Bloc, Africa and Asia.

Although she is the ultimate arbiter over what appears in her frames, each portrait is a negotiation. Were any of the people here uneasy about her as a person or artist, or angry with the result of her photographing them, they could have shown her the door and these pictures would likely not exist. People taken unawares or ambushed without their consent on a city sidewalk seldom have a choice in the matter. Barney's characters have an innate confidence that they aren't entirely at her mercy.

A respectful guest careful not to overstep, Barney at the same time knows far more about the individuals in her pictures than we do. Her reluctance to share any secrets about them she might have learned on her visits seems both polite and strategic, what happened (or not) in these sessions being knowledge that would be unprofessional and artistically confining to disclose.

Her titles are open-ended and noncommittal (e.g., "A. J.," "J. J."), like those of a Chekhov or William Trevor story. Even when they betray biographic tips about kinship (e.g., "A. J.," "J. J."), they are





And given the deceptive realism of photography, so-called truths that within a wider context turn out to be unsupported assumptions, we have to accept the possibility that our eyes are leading us astray. The clues that Barney drops about her subjects don't lead us very far and, more likely than not, we're headed down the wrong trail.

Her role in editing these photographs even before they were taken should not be overlooked. She is an unseen player in *Barney Burrell*, her multigenerational group portrait

of a German family around a table. The man in a red jacket holding a baby and the woman, perhaps his wife, are the only two of the six looking at Barney and her camera. An older woman stares off in another direction, seemingly bored or impatient, while a little girl and another woman (sibling? nanny?) are absorbed in an activity of their own. Not only has she captured the dynamics of a family, but she is also acknowledging that not everyone is always happy to sit and take instruction from an American female outsider for what can seem like forever.

We can't tell whether or not Barney asked the ruffled teenager in *Barney's World* to dress in this manner, with the French cuffs of his shirt hanging loose and his red belt uncinched, or to pick up the family Jack Russell terrier. But we must accept that she was pleased enough with those telling elements of preppy slovenliness to ask him to hold still while she pressed the camera's cable release.

Surfaces are the paradoxical essence of photography. Richard Avedon famously said that his photographs didn't "go below the surface. They don't go below anything. They're readings of the surface. I have great faith in surfaces."³

Barney is an acute depicter of surfaces, too, although her style could not be further from Avedon's. His post-1975 style bleached out the backgrounds of his subjects and presented them as nothing more than skin and rags; she wouldn't think of reducing hers to specimens by taking away their possessions. Her lens almost never comes unnervingly close to people in an effort to rattle their existential cages.

Surroundings are everything in a Barney portrait, a quality even more pronounced in her European series. The color of a room

often has a sharper emotional pitch (" ") than the human beings who pose there. How parents dress themselves and their children, the wear and texture of sofa fabrics, interests her appraising eye. In the care given to include tapestries and murals, cassones and ancestral paintings—I lost count of the frames within her frames—she demonstrates a sympathetic appr(ane)g eycassp21 He

theme of innocent American women and crafty European men was reworked again and again.

In the first chapter of his book on Hawthorne, a writer who in his opinion had been hobbled by New England provincialism, James wrote that, "Americans have as a general thing a hungry passion for the picturesque, and they are so fond of local color that they contrive to perceive it in localities in which the amateurs of other countries would detect only the most neutral tints. History, as yet, has left in the United States but so thin and impalpable a deposit that we very soon touch the hard substratum of nature."⁴

This essay appeared in 1879, however, before the 20th century tilted the balance of cultural influence in America's favor. Since the end of World War II, a common anxiety among



behavior and domestic habits. Bernard-Henri Lévy is only the latest Parisian to take an all-American road trip in order to draw sweeping conclusions about our character.⁵

The fascination has not been mutual. Barney is almost alone among her American peers in choosing to make portraits in these countries.⁶ It was her desire that *Barney* be published by Steidl in Germany, but the subject is not one that interests U.S. publishers anymore. Perhaps once Barney's

travel discoveries are more widely seen in museums, more of us will be encouraged to be as seriously interested in the Old World as it still is in us.

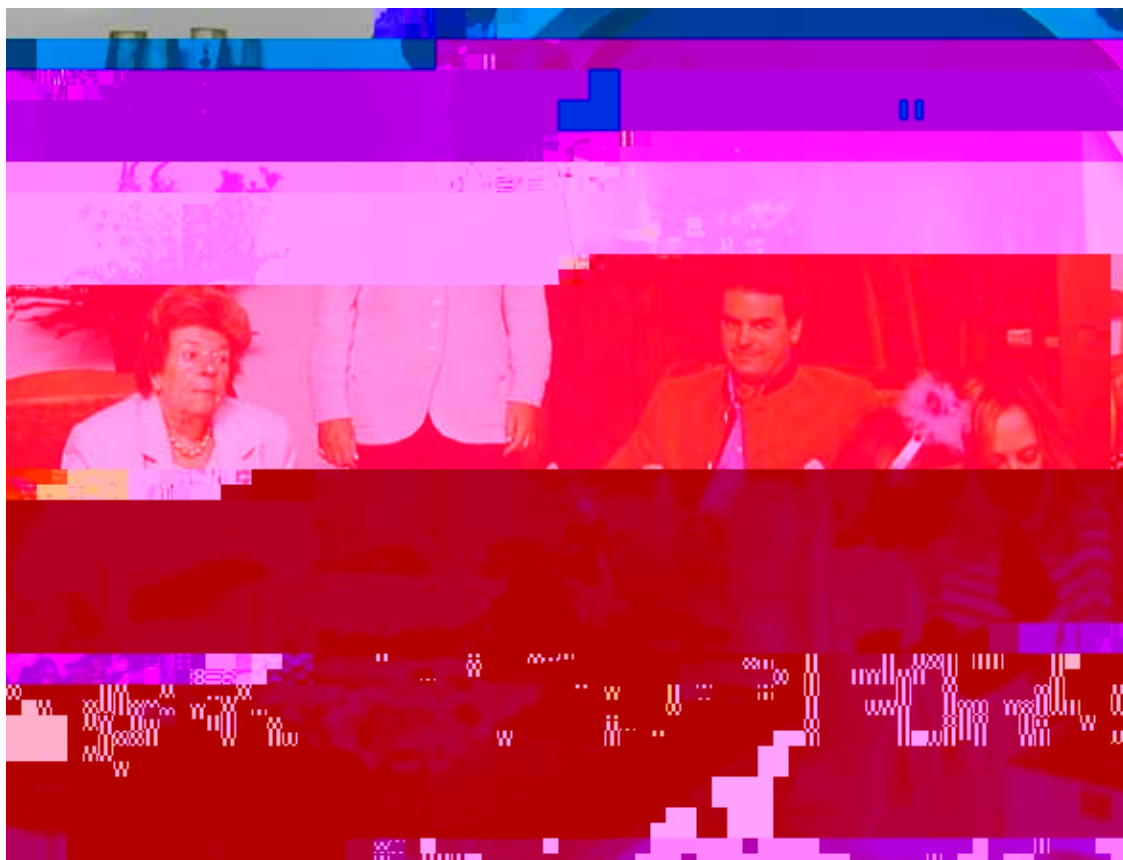
Richard B. Wood *ard*

ard, 2011

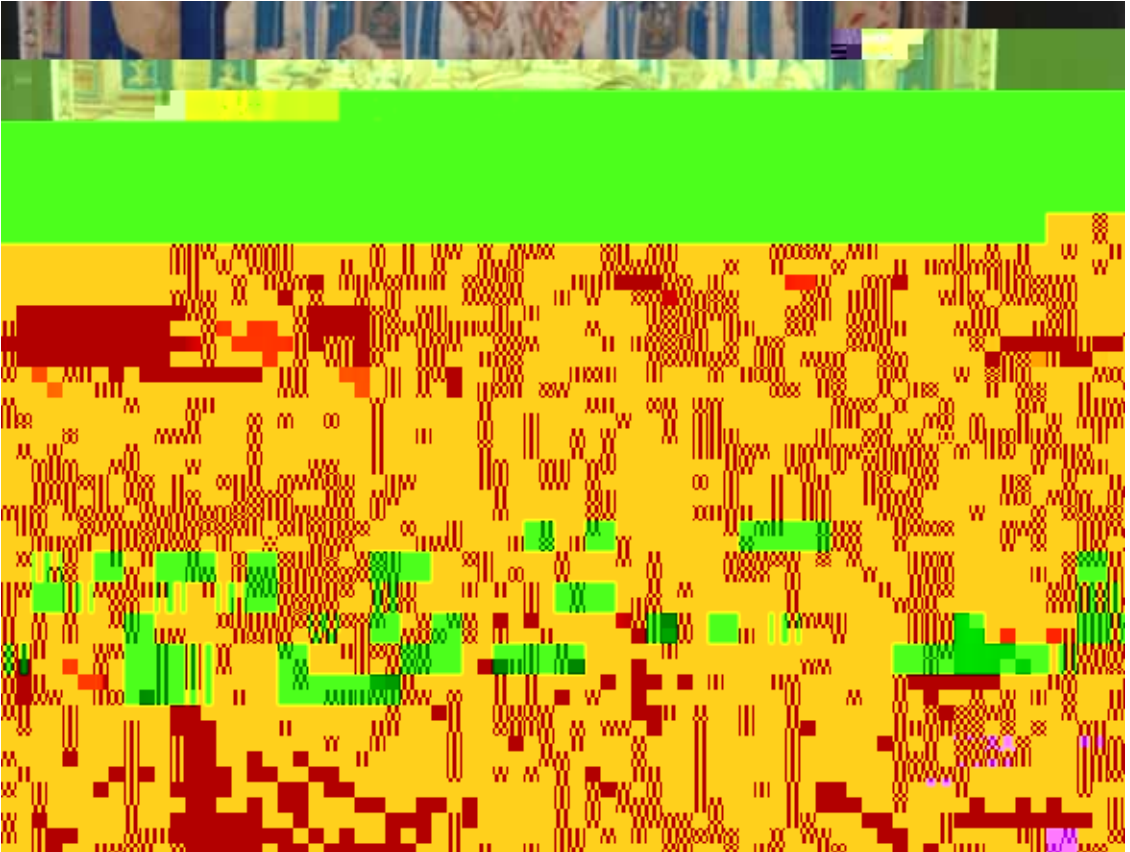
ard, 1996
from *ard*
Chromogenic color print
48 x 60"
Courtesy of Janet Borden, Inc., New York



from *Interior*, 2001
Chromogenic color print
48 x 60"
Courtesy of Janet Borden, Inc., New York



Janet Borden, Inc., 2004
from *Janet Borden, Inc.*
Chromogenic color print
48 x 60"
Courtesy of Janet Borden, Inc., New York



from , 2002

Chromogenic color print
48 x 60"

2010.17

Museum purchase with funds from George L. N. Meyer, Sr., Mrs. John C. Pritzlaff, Mr. Philip Fina and Mr. Ray H. Wolf (by exchange)
Collection of the Haggerty Museum of Art

