

On Barbara Guest

In a period of American poetry in which the most visible and indeed much of the very best poetry has been written with hooks galore ? whether outrageous or flamboyant or hip or morally uplifting, the arrogant or agonized or transcendent ? Barbara Guest has used no hooks ? and this has allowed her to create a textually saturated and satisfying poetry that embodies the transient, the ephemeral, the flickering in translucent surfaces that we call painterly for lack of a term to chart the refusal of a pseudo-depth of field that remains a ghostly presence in much of the poetry of our time. It would be easy to dwell on the exquisite surface refraction in Guest's work while eliding the significance of this insistently modulated diffusion and liminal warping and woofing that pervades her later work. Barbara Guest is not a lyric poet, as least this is what she told me last week when I visited her at the apartment in which she was staying, just a half a block from where the Whitney Museum's "American Century in Art" was being installed. I take Guest's aversion to the lyric to mean that her work is not an extension of herself ? herself expressed ? that is, not a direct expression of her feelings or subjectivity, but rather is defined by the textual composition of an aesthetic space ? herself (itself) defined. And while I would not call her an Objectivist (or in the parlance of another media "nonobjective") I think the link is there, both to the American Objectivist poets and to nonobjective painting.

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