



TINA BARNEY | THE EUROPEANS

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*Whether you are passing through or staying put, in order to give expression to a country or a situation you must have established, somewhere, close working relations, be supported by a human community; living takes time, roots form slowly. . . .<sup>1</sup>*

*The tableau presents more than it represents.<sup>2</sup>*

With an eye for detail, composition, and color, American photographer Tina Barney creates images renowned for their seductive beauty and poignant insight. In 1996, Barney was a visiting artist at the American Academy in Rome. With the help of curators and friends at Christie's and Sotheby's auction houses who provided introductions, Barney gained access to the inner circle of the Old World elite of Europe. Over the next eight years, she photographed the European aristocracy. Traveling from Italy to Austria and then England, Austria again, France, Germany, and Spain, Barney worked with a four-by-five-inch Toyo-Field camera, lights, and an assistant to photograph the real-life residents of European palatial homes.<sup>3</sup> Her photographs also show us how the collecting urges of previous generations established the tone for the lifestyles of their descendants. *Tina Barney: The Europeans* brings

together at the Frist Center twenty-one photographs from this body of work.

Armed with a natural instinct for propriety, impeccable manners, and knowledge of French and some Italian, Barney was a reassuring presence amongst strangers as she negotiated with her European subjects to devise scenes, gestures, clothing, and decor while establishing narratives both melancholic and enchanting. In *Tina Barney: Social Studies*, Jaci Judelson's documentary film about Barney's experience shooting *The Europeans*, the artist is both at ease and at work, a professional making aesthetic decisions well grounded in a visual repertoire honed by an early exposure to beauty as well as years of study and practice.<sup>4</sup> Much has been said and written about Barney's fortunate birth and lifestyle. In her formative years, she saw extraordinary examples of sophisticated interiors, original art, and couture in family homes, but like other privileged New Yorkers she was also exposed to visual culture at school, on museum visits, through travel, and by absorbing recommended readings. These advantages, plus her reputation as an artist, helped place her on strong, if not always equal, footing while working with the European aristocracy.

Barney, who is something of a modern-day Édouard Vuillard, is especially attuned to color,



pattern, texture, and composition. Her study of the luscious surfaces of paintings prompted her to wonder how she could create a similar illusion on the pristine surface of a photograph.<sup>5</sup> Her appreciation for the richness of combining diverse textiles began at home as the daughter of a fashion model turned interior designer. It is notable that the title *The Brocade Walls* (2003, fig. 1) refers not to anyone in the group portrait, but rather to the fabric wall covering that is known to have a raised pattern. The repetition and flow of color—red, in particular, but also the combination of black and white—leads the eye through the image with a rhythm worthy of Rubens. The offhand gesture of the unidentified central figure in *The Brocade Walls* suggests that Barney may have stopped her subjects midconversation with a snapshot, yet we know that every visual component is deliberate and integral to the orchestrated mise-en-scène. The mirror below the mantel reflects information that would otherwise escape the camera lens, which is itself a mirror on reality, or a version of it. Barney acknowledges that she has been influenced by the writings of Svetlana Alpers, the noted expert on Dutch art of the seventeenth century, who reminds us that the entire realist tradition is focused on what the eye sees.<sup>6</sup>

Left: Fig. 1 *The Brocade Walls*, 2003



Fig. 2 *The Ancestor*, 2001

Barney pays particular attention to how things look. Details are not so much about meaning as visual information, the attributes and artifacts of a lifestyle. To achieve the desired composition, Barney rearranges furniture, positions her subjects, and even suggests their garments. Nevertheless, she is comfortable with a chance encounter or coincidence that she notices for the first time as she scrutinizes her own work during the editing process. Architectural elements are often integral to the setting and mood. In *The Ancestor* (2001, fig. 2) space is demarcated by flourishes such as the molding that scaffolds family



portraits. The title refers not to the central foreground figure but to the absent presence of the subject of the portrait installed behind him. The ancestor established the lifestyle spread out for the descendant on the table, one that comes complete with a manservant. An open door, a recurring motif in seventeenth-century European painting, suggests an interior and an exterior world, or public and private realms in a household where the current-day family lives in only a portion of the house. The descendant's lifestyle is supported, in part, by income derived from admission fees paid by the public visiting the rooms beyond the door.

The painterly aspects of Barney's work are palpable. Her knowledge of art history is grounded in looking. She is conscious of how artists from the Renaissance forward handle light, space, color, and composition, and she pushes herself and photography in similar directions.<sup>7</sup> Her work has been discussed in the context of nineteenth-century expatriates Mary Cassatt and John Singer Sargent, in part because of their connections within a like milieu, but also on the grounds of formal similarities.<sup>8</sup> She is concerned as well with how foreground and background push and pull to create an internal tension that animates and contains an implied

Left: Fig. 3 *The Brothers in the Kitchen*, 2004

narrative.<sup>9</sup> In her earlier work she was consciously staging her subjects but working with only available light. In 1987, she began using strobe lights. By the time she began work on *The Europeans*, she was so skilled at directing color and light that she was consistently able to achieve a high degree of depth, plasticity, and physicality.

*The Europeans* are principally portraits rather than images of environments. *The Schoolyard* (1997) and *The Brothers in the Kitchen* (2004, fig. 3) demonstrate a casual familiarity and informality seen in Barney's earlier photographs of her own family and friends, in *Sunday New York Times* (1982), or *Graham Cracker Box* (1983, fig. 4), for example. Barney is



Fig. 4 *Graham Cracker Box*, 1983



Fig. 5 *The Hands*, 2002

comfortable with the occasional fortunate coincidence or when an unconscious gesture mimics something seen elsewhere in an image. She is a fierce editor of her own work who knows what makes a photograph memorable.

In *The Hands* (2002, fig. 5) father and son stand in front of works of art. Both have their arms folded, hands visible. In the painting behind them, a man is depicted reaching around the woman sprawled in front of him to grasp her right breast. A nearby sculpture is a figure of a nude female with the right arm folded across the chest, hand and

fingers articulated, and with both breasts exposed. The cool blue stripes in the son's shirt break up a field of warm reds and browns, leading the eye from the antique gilded frame to the nickel base of the Warren Platner contemporary table. What makes the photograph memorable, however, is that we want to know more about the subjects and their stories, their relationships, and even what their futures hold.

Barney's initial impetus for becoming a professional art photographer grew out of a longing for the East Coast life she missed after moving to Sun Valley, Idaho, in 1973. As much as anything, she wanted to preserve family and specifically her family's way of life. In *Three Generations* (1996, fig. 6), mother, daughter, and granddaughter engage with the camera in three different ways, all provocative. We wonder whether they are packing a house to be sold or only leaving for a season while they summer or winter elsewhere. Regardless, they are metaphors for the seasons of life. We are powerless to control the passage of time or the changes that occur over time. Photographs keep our memories of the past vivid, but the lost moments implicit and intrinsic to photography remind us also that the past is irrecoverable.

In 1955, Henri Cartier-Bresson published a study of Europeans that focused on the still-present



Right: Fig. 6 *Three Generations*, 1996

devastation in Europe following World War II. He acknowledged that it was important to establish meaningful relationships in order to produce rewarding outcomes, and those relationships required a level of trust. A half century later, Barney used the same approach. She engaged her subjects in dialogue and allowed them, in turn, to display their deeply rooted self-discipline and dignity. Thomas Weski notes that as photography transitions from analog to digital, the different methods of photography retain a common element, which is their subjective view of reality. Our beliefs and doubts about the veracity of the photographic image endure. Noting that Barney's photographs recall theater shots, he adds that a play is something that "pretends to be life itself."<sup>10</sup>

The theatricality of the tableau, especially as seen in Barney's large-format work, simultaneously engages the viewer as a spectator clearly positioned outside of the image and as a participant invited to step through the looking glass. Jean-François Chevrier's observation, "the *tableau* presents more than it represents," reminds us that what is evidentiary is a facade for a larger unspoken truth. We the viewers long to return to the imagined safety and security of bygone elegance. The highbrow aesthetic has been coveted, mimicked, and commercialized in popular

culture.<sup>11</sup> The nouveau riche and the bourgeoisie can approximate opulent interiors. Ready-to-wear may have brought the look of couture within reach. We may seek and acquire the look, but there is a level of authenticity that is not duplicable. With her photographs, Barney never allows us to forget that even in her capable hands, a theater of manners is an idealized fiction.<sup>12</sup>

Susan H. Edwards, Ph.D., executive director and CEO, Frist Center for the Visual Arts

## NOTES

1. Henri Cartier-Bresson and Jean Clair, *Henri Cartier-Bresson: Europeans* (Boston: Bulfinch Press, 1998), 5.
2. Jean-François Chevrier, "The Tableau and the Document of Experience," in *Click Doubleclick—The Documentary Factor*, ed. Thomas Weski (Munich: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2006), 51–61.
3. In Italy, Barney was assisted by Bob Liebreich, Colleen Daly, and Olimpia Pallavicino. Bertrand Stark assisted Barney in France, Germany, and Spain. She was assisted by Ewan Burns in the United Kingdom and Annunziata Schmidt-Chiari in Austria.
4. *Tina Barney: Social Studies*, directed by Jaci Judelson (IndiePix, 2005).
5. Conversation with the author, June 17, 2014.
6. Svetlana Alpers, *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983). The Dutch fascination with optics and scientific observation turns up in many ways in the art of the period. There is also speculation that several Dutch Masters utilized the *camera obscura*, an optical device that was a precursor for the camera and photography. The depiction of mirrors and the repetition of images within images—such as those that appear in seventeenth-century painting, as well as in many of Barney's photographs—are self-referential, reminding the viewer of the disconnect between reality and a realistic representation of a supposed reality.

7. John Szarkowski, who purchased *The Skier* (1987) for the Museum of Modern Art collection, said that the light reminded him of Georges de La Tour.

8. Susan A. Van Scoy, "Exteriors, Interiors, and Positionality: The Photography of Tina Barney," unpublished diss. (Stony Brook University, The Graduate School, 2010). For an insightful text on *The Europeans*, which positions Barney in the literary context of the nineteenth century and the Grand Tour, see Richard Woodward, *The Europeans: Photographs by Tina Barney*, exh. cat. (Milwaukee: Haggerty Museum of Art, Marquette University, 2011).

9. Conversation with the author, June 17, 2014.

10. Weski, 36–39.

11. For a discussion of how the aesthetics of high art are disseminated in popular culture, see Thomas Crow, "Modernism and Mass Culture in the Visual Arts," in *Modernism and Modernity: The Vancouver Conference Papers*, eds. Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, Serge Guilbaut, and David Solkin (Halifax: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1983), 215–64.

12. See *Tina Barney: Photographs—Theater of Manners*, with texts by Tina Barney and Andy Grundberg (Zurich: Scalo, 1997).

This exhibition was organized by Susan H. Edwards,  
executive director and CEO, Frist Center for the Visual Arts.

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