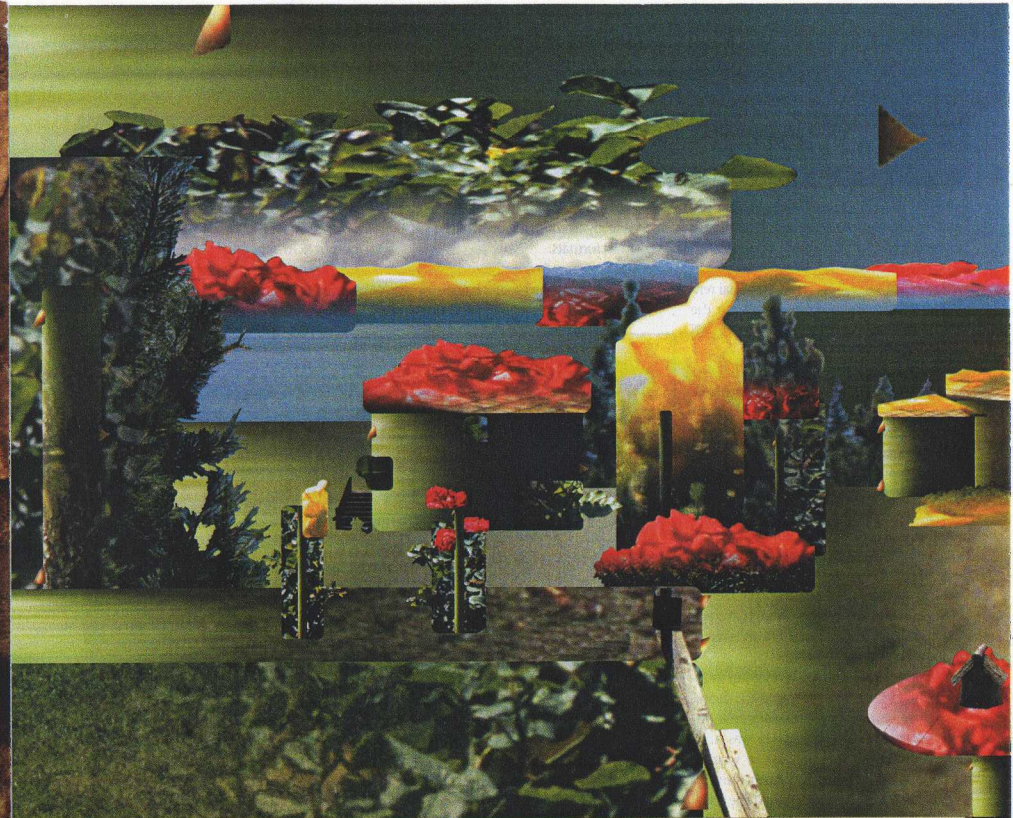


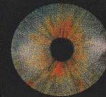
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PROFILE



Les Barta

By Stephanie Boozer

Reconstructing Reality

Ever since the first cave paintings, artistic expression of our world and our place in it has been a dominant force in the development of mankind. Throughout history, painters, sculptors, photographers and others have translated human emotion, behavior and ideas into a diverse record of our existence. From the most basic television program to a Raphael masterpiece, our relationship with art is

deep and complex, emphasizing the basic argument that art is dependent upon life, and life upon art. Guided by this principle, photographer Les Barta and his esoteric "photoconstructions" deconstruct our perceived reality and piece it back together with a new logic.

Nestled quietly in the mountains of Nevada, near the famed Lake Tahoe, Barta's studio also serves as his sanctuary, perched at an approximate elevation of 7000 feet.

Barta's photographic collages assign a new sense of order to scenes we often perceive as commonplace, buildings or monuments that we hardly think of in a critical sense. His chopped-up versions of everyday settings force the viewer to rethink the importance of manmade structures and their components. In his artist statement, Barta explains, "Once denied its familiar identity, a setting can be reduced to a composition of structural elements, suggesting the archi-



Above Left: "Tahoe View of Roses." View of Lake Tahoe from the artist's house. 1997 computer photoconstruction, 16x20-inch digital print. **Above:** "Frank Synthesis." Setting of the Marin County, CA, Courthouse building designed by Frank Lloyd Wright, known for blending the natural elements of a setting into his structures. Here the reverse occurs so that the natural elements of the setting become variations of the building. 1998 computer photoconstruction, 16x20-inch digital print.

ture of visual language and its abstract content."

Analyzing the individual components that make up a structure, Barta breaks down the scene into its basic elements and reassembles them with a new significance. It's a complex process, best described by Barta himself: "I select a paradigm, such as a tree, a flower, or one of the structural elements present in a setting, to represent a theme, and treat all of the structural elements as metaphors for the paradigm. Engaging in what I call 'metaphorical algebra,' I synthesize the components of these structures into images that I call 'photoconstructions.'"

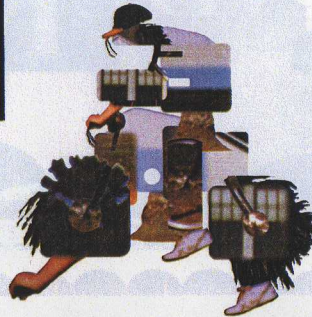
Photoconstructions start out as ordinary

photographs of a scene, usually a well known architectural structure. For example, his piece "Fine Arts Phenomena" is a photoconstruction of the Palace of Fine Arts in San Francisco, CA. For this piece, Barta extensively photographed the exterior of the building, which was designed in the style of a Greek temple. As the basis for the main image, Barta chose the one photograph that held the best balance of the elements for which he was looking and then broke down the image into these basic elements (such as columns, friezes, etc.). Applying his "metaphorical algebra," Barta then reconstructed the elements into a new whole, bending the meaning of the structure at the same time.

Barta's work is highly philosophical in nature, calling into question our own perceived realities against the one true reality of natural order. In "Fine Arts Phenomena," Barta explores the idea that each element of the image can serve as a metaphor for the others. His job then, is to determine the structural metaphors and synthesize them into a whole, unified structure.

While this sounds like a complex approach to creating what are essentially photographic collages, the concept is actually very simple. Our own biases, prejudices and experiences color our vision and our own perception of what is real. Instead of just seeing what's in front of our faces, we interpret each element, looking for some type of

LES BARTA



Above: "Bike/Rider." San Francisco setting. Computer photoconstruction, 16x20-inch digital print. **Below:** "Nut Forest." Reconstruction of an old "Nut Tree" mansion along Highway 80 in Vacaville, CA. 1993 computer photoconstruction, 16x20-inch digital print.

meaning. (Or, in some cases, we apply our own meaning in place of what is already there.) Recognizing this human tendency, Barta wants his pieces to question this phenomenon and force viewers to redefine their own biases.

Barta's work is based largely on a philosophical movement called "phenomenology," an esoteric study of phenomena as the objects of a person's perception. The movement began with German philosopher Edmund Husserl's writings in 1910, and has since been adapted as a well-studied philosophical doctrine. The Oxford English Reference Dictionary (Oxford University Press, 1996) rather broadly defines phenomenology as "the philosophical movement that concentrates on the study of consciousness and its immediate objects."

Don't reach for your college philosophy textbook just yet. You don't have to grasp the concept of phenomenology to appreciate Barta's work. The artist's overall concern isn't that his audience fully understands his work on all levels. Rather, Barta simply wants to affect his viewers, and promote

inner reflection. After all, art works on many levels.

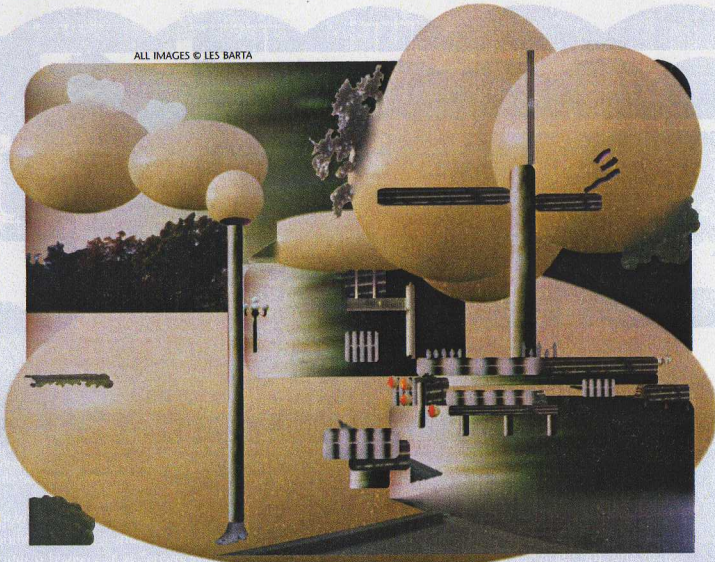
Barta's concept of defining the basic elements of a scene and determining its importance eventually led him to study the work of Frank Lloyd Wright, whose designs often mimicked the elements of nature surrounding them. Wright's creations often seem to be extensions of their natural environments, almost like structural metaphors of their surroundings. Barta's affinity with Wright is most evident in his piece titled "Frank Synthesis" (shown on page 31).

"I don't want people to think that I'm oversimplifying his work," explains

"When you see a setting," he explains, "you assume that all of these things can be metaphors for each other. If you make that assumption, then apply a metaphorical algebra to harmonize them, you act on your assumption and recreate the world around you. You transform your perception, logically as well as through an act of will."

Reinventing reality and questioning the accepted world view came quite naturally to Barta. His parents emigrated to the United States in 1950, after first escaping the Nazi and later the Communist regimes. Barta was born in Budapest, Hungary, in 1947, and because of a short residence in Austria, actually spoke German as his first

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Barta, "but he basically designed buildings so that they flowed with the structural concepts already in nature around them."

"Frank Synthesis" is composed of images of the Marin County Courthouse building, just north of San Francisco, and is the result of a phenomenological view of the building and both the man-made and natural metaphors in the setting. And, since Wright's design elements already metaphorically spoke for their environmental counterparts, the two ideologies melded as one to create the piece.

The Barta family eventually settled in San Francisco, a city that instantly captivated the young artist. Even today, many of Barta's subjects are popular San Francisco locales, though it might take viewers some time to recognize them in their newly defined order. Barta spent his college days primarily at Columbia University in New York, with a brief stint at the University of California at Berkeley. He initially studied drawing and painting, finding that he was good at both, but photography soon dominated his artistic vision.



Above: "Novato Flower." Elements of Marin County, CA, are constructed as a flower. 1992 computer photoconstruction, 16x20-inch digital print.
Below: "Rose Bush." Elements of Tahoe View reconstructed in terms of rose bush motif. 1998 computer photoconstruction, 16x20-inch digital print.

"I had this burning desire," he explains, "an obsession with a vision of transforming the way we are. This is how I started experimenting with our perception, by taking apart and reassembling photographs of our world."



With this premise in mind, Barta began making collages. He started with the basic tools, cutting up photographs and slides and pasting them back together. "It was a lot of work, but when you're obsessed, you do these things," said Barta. "I was finding the best way to express my vision and seeing if I could actually produce something that would help me create the transformation I was seeking in life."

The transformation of human beings, perceptually and physically, has captivated

Barta throughout his career. In his eyes, "It isn't important what you transform into as much as that you have the power to do so. We have the power to make our own reality. We are how we see, and art is a very valuable tool for this."

As personal computers gained popularity around 1990, an architect friend urged Barta to try the new medium. One stroke of the keyboard and he was hooked, tossing out his cutting knife and glue brush. He immersed himself in the world of computers,

learning all the tricks of Adobe Photoshop, scanning and creating digital imagery. Finding an affinity with the Macintosh platform, Barta currently works with a Macintosh G4. Though computers have steadily improved in performance and capability, and thus increasing the efficiency of creating artwork, Barta's work remains pure of concept.

"A lot of computer art is more about the technology used to create it rather than about the visual concept," he says. "So, a lot of people throw rocks at computer art. For me, the computer is a tool to do what I've always been doing, which is to try to refine and perfect concepts and translate them into visual language."

Barta's constructions are printed at a reasonable size, at 16x20 inches, and he continuously experiments with new printing methods and technology. For the past decade, Barta has closely monitored the evolution of digital printing methods, always looking for the best print with the best archival quality. All of his prints are done on heavy watercolor paper. Beginning with Iris prints, or Giclées, Barta now primarily uses Encad printers. He's also working with CSI Lightjet and studying the newer, more archival pigmented inks, exploring new Roland and Epson products.

"The Iris always makes beautiful prints," he says. "But, some of the newer printers are really exceptional. Though they aren't as luminescent as the Iris, color is very accurate."

Barta takes his inspiration from the world around him, but looks for settings that comprise both man-made and natural objects with common roots. Striking natural beauty or architecture is typically what he looks for, though recognizable landmarks give his pieces more power. Barta is currently working on a photoconstruction of the Golden Gate Bridge, one of the most readily recognizable symbols of the West Coast.

Throughout his long artistic career, Barta has yet to determine a favorite image. Whatever piece he has most recently completed usually takes that prize. But when pressed, Barta confessed that a 1983 piece entitled "The Coffee Pot" sticks in his mind as a favorite because he was so obsessed with making it mathematically correct. The image is simple, transforming ordinary objects throughout a room into a coffee pot.

Whether the world at large understands Barta's phenomenological vision or not, his work has become favored among galleries, museums and art collectors across the country. His resume of exhibitions, juried shows, and awards is extensive.

All things considered, Barta is happiest when people simply appreciate his work. Understanding deep philosophical concepts isn't necessary. "I want my pieces to work on several levels," he explains. "Sensuality, beauty and grace have to be

there, like poetry. But I also want them to work on a mathematic or logical level. There's a point when the work looks absurd at first, then makes complete sense. When you find that point, the work does its job."

Stephanie Booser is a freelance writer and fine art photographer living in Atlanta, Georgia. Her work has been published in Rangefinder magazine, on The Imaging Resource web site, and on America Online's Digital City web sites.

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