



# Les Barta

by Holly Stuart Hughes

**Y**ou could call Les Barta a landscape photographer, though his photos don't look like any landscape you've ever seen. Barta enjoys hiking and taking photographs near his Nevada home, not far from Lake Tahoe. But when he gets his outdoor photos developed, his work has only just begun. Working in Photoshop on his Power Mac, he isolates or deletes elements, cutting out shapes and reconfiguring them to make his own trees, clouds and vistas out of similar shapes. His goal, he says, is to distill the landscape's essential form and to recreate it in a photographic print.

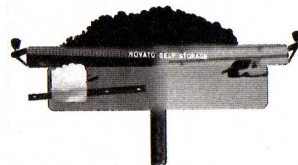
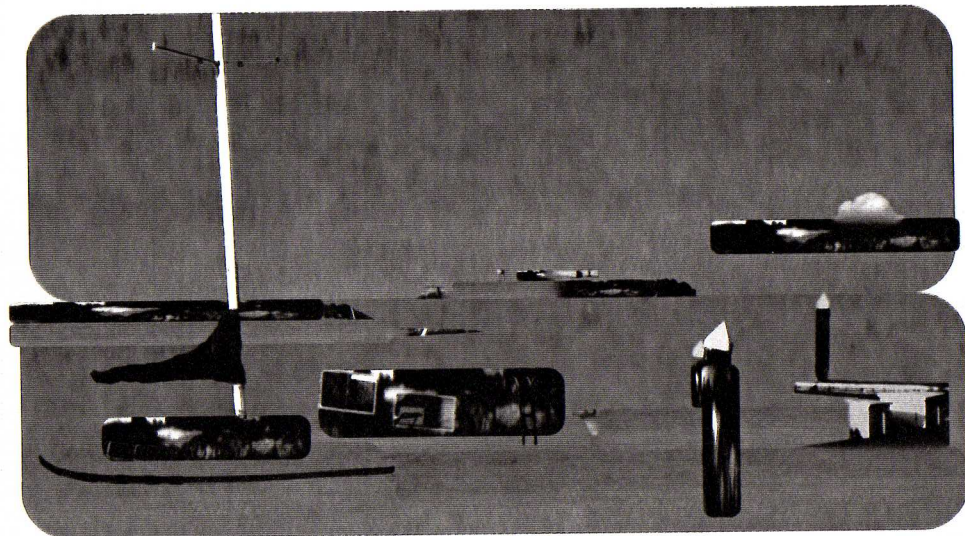
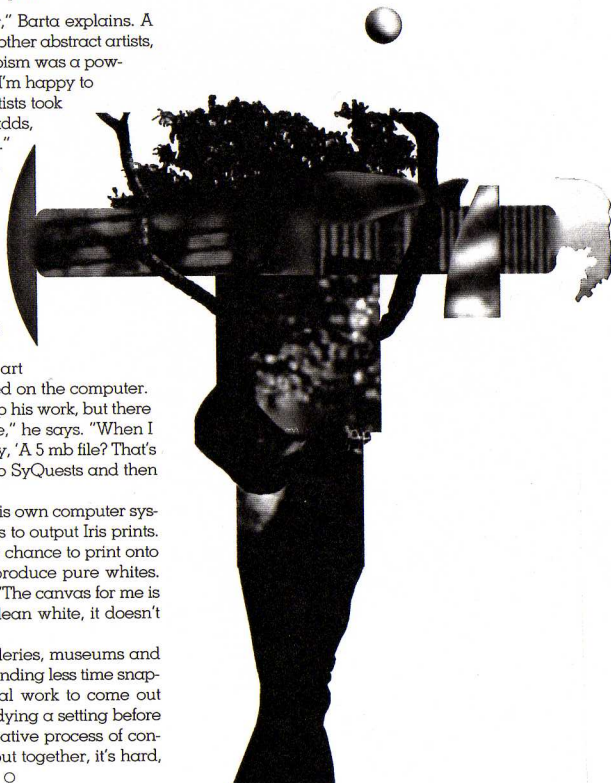
"I like to take things apart and put them back together," Barta explains. A former painter, Barta has been influenced by Cubists and other abstract artists, but his approach is more personal and introspective. "Cubism was a powerful, forceful rejection of the way things actually appear. I'm happy to say I was inspired by the confidence with which those artists took apart the visual world, but I had a different purpose." He adds, "My goal is to create a powerful re-experiencing of reality."

Barta began making photo collages in the early Eighties. At that time, the process was laborious. He first made a slide and then projected it on the wall so he could measure each picture element and map out which sections he wanted to cut out and reuse. He had to have several Cibachromes made at different sizes, so each element of the collage was available at the right scale. With a knife, he would cut out each element and glue it onto a piece of paper. "It was an enormous amount of work and the prints were not something you can mass produce," he says.

Around 1990, an architect friend who liked Barta's art showed him how sites and blueprints could be generated on the computer. Barta immediately saw how computer imaging could help his work, but there were still problems. "There was no Photoshop at the time," he says. "When I tried to make prints, the labs or service bureaus would say, 'A 5 mb file? That's too big for us.' Eventually I found bureaus that had 44 mb SyQuests and then could take my 8 to 10 mb files to them."

These days, he creates 18 to 20 mb files and works on his own computer system. Occasionally he produces Cibachromes, but prefers to output Iris prints. Not only does he like the color quality of the inks and the chance to print onto 300 pound paper, he prefers the way the Irises can reproduce pure whites. "I have a lot of 'canvas' around my image," he explains. "The canvas for me is simply area where the image is not there. If it's not a clean white, it doesn't work."

Barta has exhibited his work in over 125 shows in galleries, museums and colleges across the country. These days, he says, he is spending less time snapping photos and more time "trying to get an individual work to come out better." Sometimes he spends weeks or even months studying a setting before he photographs it, he says. "Once I get through the creative process of conceiving the image and then deciding how it has to be put together, it's hard, rational work, almost like making an installation piece." ○



Using his own scenic photos as raw material, fine arts photographer Les Barta builds new landscapes through collage. On the computer, he replaces trees, clouds, sky and buildings with similar shapes and forms. Barta calls these substitutions "metaphorical algebra."

