

ART BASEL MIAMI BEACH 2022

Barbara Ess: *Fugitive Enigma*

Booth S7

Magenta Plains is pleased to present *Fugitive Enigma*, a solo presentation of historical works by renowned experimental photographer Barbara Ess. On view at the fair is a selection of six large format pinhole photographs from the 1980s and 1990s. These photographs remain the most lucid expressions of her creative philosophy, emerging from a place of pre-consciousness to reveal new layers of our world through a uniquely humanizing lens.

As the boundaries between the “real” and “perceived” worlds become ever more porous in our technological era, Ess’ timeless work draws our attention to the intense primal emotions and experiences that exist like brittle moments of truth within the world of simulation. Surrounded in a nimbus of shadow, her images speak to a non-physical existence which vibrates in a liminal space like changing states of matter.

The distortion of light and space characteristic of her chosen medium provides a direct line to Ess’ relationship to the world, one of doubt and fluidity. The pinhole camera acted as an extension of her own bodily awareness, capturing experiences of the “damaged, crumbling, flooded, shining, decaying, pathetic” physical world, the presence of her emotional self, and the personal craving for memory.

Barbara Ess was born in 1948 in Brooklyn, NY. She received a BA in Philosophy and English Literature from University of Michigan, Ann Arbor in 1969. After graduating from college, Ess moved to New York where she spent a year working as an editor at a political magazine called *War Peace Reporting*. During that same period she became caught up in the burgeoning experimental film scene, which prompted her to enroll at the London School of Film Technique in 1971. Eventually she dropped out, bought a Super-8 Bolex and started working for the Film Co-op in London.

Ess began to transition from film to photography in 1974, after buying a Polaroid camera while traveling in Europe. Upon her return to New York City in 1976 she became involved with music, performance, and the creation of artist books, making a name for herself in the downtown art scene while performing in famed no-wave groups such as The Static, Daily Life, The Glenn Branca Ensemble, and Y Pants. She was the founder and editor of the legendary mixed-media publication *Just Another Asshole*, a series of anthologies of artist works in various formats.

In 1983, she built a pinhole camera based on a diagram published in *The New York Times*, loving the distortion it caused “because it loosens things up.” Throughout the early 1980s, Ess exhibited at Franklin Furnace, Cable Gallery, The Kitchen, A.I.R. Gallery, Printed Matter, White Columns, and Artists Space. Her interest was always in the body as “the place where our interior life intersects with the outside world.”

In 1990, she graced the cover of *Artforum*, accompanied by an article by Carlo McCormick. In 1993 the Queens Museum curated the traveling exhibition “Barbara Ess: Photography, Installation and Books.” Her career expanded quickly as she began exhibiting at museums internationally and was represented by Curt Marcus in New York, where she mounted a two person show with Bruce Conner in 1997. A book of her photo work, *I Am Not This Body*, (published by Aperture in 2001) was selected as one of the ten top photography books of the year by *The Village Voice*.

Ess’ more recent projects in photography, video, and sound dealt with personal and political themes including boundaries, distance and separation. Employing lo-fi optical devices and image systems, small telescopes, and a toy microscope, Ess embraced the glitches and unintended artifacts resulting from her processes, seeking to depict the uncertainties of perception and uncover “ambiguous perceptual boundaries between people, between the self and the not self, and between ‘in’ here and ‘out’ there.”