

Kate Barry

My Own Space

June 17th...
Sept. 17th 2023
Opening
Wednesday
June 14th
6.30 pm



musée
Nicéphore
Niépcé

Curated by:
Sylvain Besson,
musée Nicéphore Niépce
Exhibition scenography:
Anne-Céline Borey

The museum would like to thank:
Roman de Kermadec,
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Nicéphore Niépce,
Canson,
La Maison Veuve Ambal.

Kate Barry [1967-2013] began her photography career in 1996. She made her name with fashion and magazine work, effortlessly capturing the tone of the time [the mother-daughter campaign for Comptoir des Cotonniers in 2003-2006, portraits of actors for the release of François Ozon's film *Huit Femmes* in 2002, etc.].

She always managed to bring her own gaze to the work, despite the constraints typically involved with commissions, and this led her in a more personal direction. A standout example is the series of portraits she took of people who work at the huge food market in Rungis, just outside Paris [*Les Gueules de Rungis*, 2009], but her landscapes are where her sensibility seems to shine through most. Far from the gloss of fashion magazines, client imperatives and her family's constant media presence (she is the daughter of John Barry and Jane Birkin), Kate Barry produced subtle, poetic pieces with a pared-down feel, that combined melancholy and a sense of oppressiveness.

In 2021, Kate Barry's family donated all of her colour and black and white negatives, her digital work, her contact sheets, a selection of prints and the pieces from her two main shows [Bunkamara Gallery, Japan, 2000 and Arles, France, 2017] to the Musée Nicéphore Niépce.

The museum is now holding the first retrospective of this unique, diverse and complex body of work.

A book will be published in tandem with the exhibition in September 2023 by Éditions de La Martinière.

Lâcher prise
[extracts]

Though she is mainly known for her portraits of celebrities from the music, film and fashion industries for newspapers and magazines, Kate Barry's work is that of a complete photographer and can, in no way, be reduced to just that field. Most of all, Kate Barry grew up in a family where images [and photographic images in particular] were omnipresent.

Photography is indeed ubiquitous in most people's lives, but for Kate Barry growing up, it was relentless. As the daughter of actor Jane Birkin and composer John Barry¹, Kate Barry's everyday life received a lot of exposure. As a couple, Jane Birkin and Serge Gainsbourg were front page news for the duration of their relationship. The press covered their every move and they often opened their front door to television cameras and photographers.

In Kate Barry's personal circle, photography was equally omnipresent. Her uncle, Andrew Birkin was a photographer, and often accompanied the family on their travels, once even taking a four-year-old Kate Barry with him to scout locations for Stanley Kubrick; he photographed her on Napoleon's throne in Fontainebleau, a storied and memorable portrait². Her young life was one of pictures and images: Jane Birkin, her mother, an actor, singer, and soon-to-be director was friends with the photographer Gabrielle Crawford, during Kate's childhood, Birkin moved in with film director Jacques Doillon and her sisters both began acting and modelling at a very young age.

As a teen, Kate Barry seemed to find her path early as, in 1983, she entered the prestigious École de la Chambre Syndicale de la Couture in Paris. She even got the chance to show her work in catwalk shows in 1985⁴, but her addiction to various substances hampered her progress at the school. In the early nineties, a spell in a rehab centre in London that used the "Minnesota" method led her to set up a similar centre in France. She set up the charity APTÉ [Aide et Prévention des Toxicodépendances par l'Entraide] in 1991 and the centre welcomed its first patients in 1994. Not long afterwards, Kate Barry gave up fashion design in favour of photography. "Photography was not an obvious choice for me. Far from it. When I was sixteen, my boyfriend of the time gave me my first camera. And much later, when I was 28, yet another boyfriend gave me a camera. I did not see it as something to enjoy. I started to enjoy it later on, when the notion of pleasure became more important, when I had to rebuild. I was able to create my space, a space that was mine alone."⁴

Despite a shaky start, her early work was imbued with the character of the photographer she was to become. Like so many self-taught photographers, her friends and family constituted her initial subject pool. As she progressively became more adept with the camera, she learned to play with light, creating a melancholic, weighty atmosphere composing shots with intentionally empty swathes for added drama while her family willingly played along.

1. Composer [he scored over one hundred films between 1960 and 2001].

2. For a film about Napoleon that never got made.

3. Birkin Jane, *Post-scriptum, Journal intime 1982-2013*, Fayard, 2019.

4. Interview with Léo Scheer (2005).

Her services were soon in demand and her shooting schedule filled up rapidly. She shot a reportage for *Elle Magazine* in October 1996 [20 rolls of film], commissions for *Lui* in November 1996 [21 rolls of film], for *Figaro Madame* [30 rolls of film] and *Syigma* [23 rolls of film] in December 1996. She maintained this frenetic pace into 1997, with portraits of Alexandra Kazan, Françoise Hardy, Sabine Azéma, Maïwenn, and that's only the first three months! Magazines, in particular fashion magazines, had huge circulation at the time and the profusion of titles led to many opportunities for Kate Barry. They included *Elle*, *Vogue*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Jalouse*, *L'Officiel*, *Gala*, *Off Femme*, *DS*, then later on, *H&K*, *Glory*, *Madame Figaro*, *Elle Japan*, *Joyce*, *Vanity Fair*, etc. Being hired by such a variety of publications required her to be hugely versatile as a photographer.

Having been, in her formative years, surrounded by photographers and image makers of all sorts, and even having modelled her own fashion designs at one point, from 1996 onwards, Kate Barry was seen as a force to be reckoned with: the combination of her access to certain personalities and the unique visual world she created, led many editors and models to call on her services. In numerous jobs, she got a chance to lean into her activism like the poster she shot for feminist group Ni Putes Ni Soumises in 2003, the cover of the 1st edition of *Rose*, a magazine for women with cancer [Autumn 2011], and the series of portraits she took as part of the “Vague blanche pour la Syrie” campaign in 2012 [including portraits of Sandrine Bonnaire, Sonia Rykiel and Sophie Marceau in a political

and photographic project initiated by photographer Sarah Moon]. It has to be said, Kate Barry did not have an issue with challenging her image as photographer to the stars. A good example is the 2009 series of portraits of people working at the Rungis wholesale food market to celebrate the market's 40th anniversary that began as a regular commission but turned out to be a truly meaningful experience for Barry.

From 2002 onwards and up until 2008 at least, Kate Barry started shooting landscapes, marking a departure from her usual work that allowed her true sensibilities to come to the fore. Alone in nature, she captured details, without necessarily having to think about it. This was the beginning of, as writer Marie Darrieussecq suggested, “her active wandering, her determined wandering [if there is such a thing]”⁵. As a counterpoint to her portrait work, Kate Barry truly felt the need to venture into other areas of photography: “That's why I took photos of places. It was a way to lose my way, to get away from that knowing gaze, that look of recognition.”⁶ Over the course of her travels through Israel, Jordan, Normandy [in particular Le Havre], Brittany [in Dinard with Jean Rolin], Kate Barry built a delicate, fragile body of work, a succession of “hesitant places” that spark introspection in the viewer. Those close to her refer to her landscapes as her “real” work as a photographer, the work that best represented her personality, where her anxieties and silences found their most apt expression. Jean Rolin tells us that “Kate used to have a miniature camera with which she filmed everything, compulsively, not just what was

5. Barry Kate, Darrieussecq Marie, Dufour Diane, Escoulen Fannie, *The Habit of being*, Éditions Xavier Barral/Le Bal, 2017.

6. Interview with Léo Scheer.

going on around her, but what was happening at her feet” and that she would only very rarely lift the camera to film her surroundings. Consequently, the framing and atmosphere of Kate Barry’s landscapes can be surprising. She never seems to lift her eyes. The line of the horizon is always high, the focus is on the ground and its otherness. Her landscapes showcase unusual subjects [cemeteries, faded walls, rubbish abandoned in the undergrowth etc.], melancholic atmospheres [a plant struggling to grow out of cement, a badly maintained country road under a punishing sun], and anonymous bodies, as if lost in urban landscapes where nature is reasserting its rights, etc. Her work in *Dinard, Essai d’auto-biographie Immobilière*⁷ with Jean Rolin acts as a manifesto for her landscape work, a succession of the “hesitant places” dear to both their hearts⁸.

When her career came to a brutal end in December 2013, Kate Barry had a number of documentary projects on the go, some unfinished, on writers Flannery O’Connor and Mary McCarthy as well as the film she made about Philippe Djian⁹. She was on the frontlines of the changes digital technologies brought, where the boundaries between fixed and moving images were suddenly blurred, and Kate Barry’s shift into documentary film was very much in line with her role as a photographer of her time: as a child and teenager at the centre of the celebrity maelstrom of the seventies and eighties, a young woman assailed by images in her everyday life, herself a producer of photographic images as an amateur before

turning professional, a photographer to order then fully-fledged artist, showing and living from her art. A study of the Kate Barry collection depicts the various possibilities of our relationship to photography as the artist deploys her personality and her own space, first through the images of others, before becoming a creator of icons herself.

Sylvain Besson

7. Rolin Jean, Barry Kate, *Dinard, Essai d’auto-biographie Immobilière*, La Table Ronde, 2012.

8. Rolin Jean, *Savannah*, P.O.L., 2015.

9. Barry Kate, *Balade avec Djian*, En Haut des Marches, 2012.

1.
Laetitia Casta
[Elle]
October 2 2000
Gelatin silver print
© Kate Barry



2.
Selfportrait
[E/le]
2001
Gelatin silver print
© Kate Barry



3.
Selfportrait
[*Cosmopolitan*]
october 2 2000
Gelatin silver print
© Kate Barry



4.
Jane Birkin
[Brittany]
1995
Gelatin silver print
© Kate Barry



4

5.
Fashion
[Cosmopolitan]
2000
Gelatin silver print
© Kate Barry



5

6.
Les Robes Noires
[Elle]
2001
Gelatin silver print
© Kate Barry



7.
Reine Graves
[Joyce]
2002
Chromogenic Print
© Kate Barry



7

8.
Samir, Hubert
Rungis Market
2009
Chromogenic Print
© Kate Barry



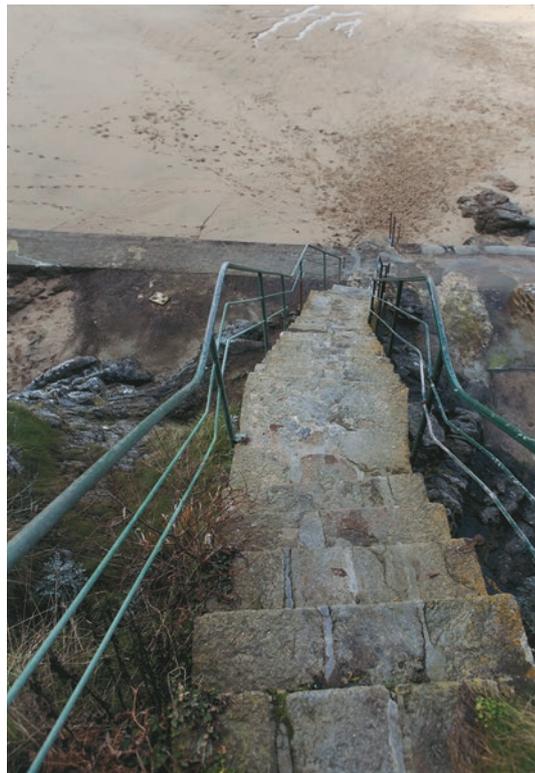
8

9.
Landscape
2002-2008
Chromogenic Print
© Kate Barry



9

10.
Dinard
2011-2012
Chromogenic Print
© Kate Barry



10

11.
Landscape
2002-2008
Chromogenic Print
© Kate Barry



11

12.
Landscape
2002-2008
Chromogenic Print
© Kate Barry



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