

JOAN BACKES: HOME

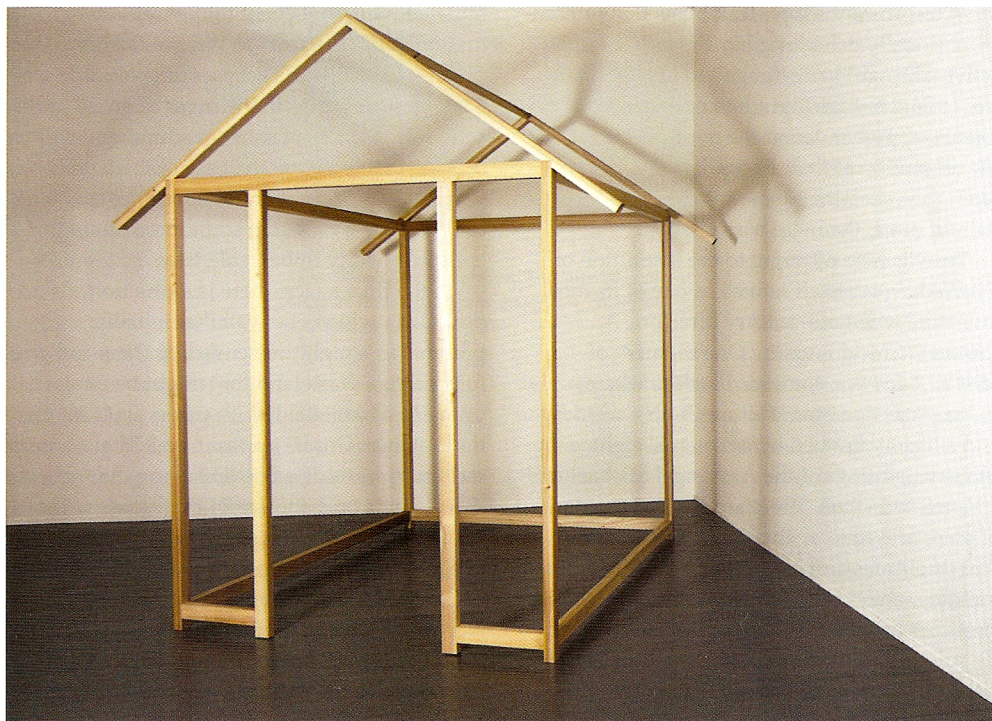
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What if a house were a ghost, instead of having one, haunted only by itself? Rhode Island-based Joan Backes constructs what might be memorials to vanished architecture with the spare frameworks of her *Home* installations. Rendered from tree to lumber in Shaker precision, invisible pegs at each corner make a mystery of the wood's secure assembly. The skeleton threshold is without its usual sharp definition, given how inside and outside blur together. Like the outlines on the stage floor of Lars von Trier's film *Dogville*, an entire village might be imagined from this three-dimensional drawing in space.

For a 2011 commission in a German park, Backes arranged three *Berlin Häuser*, made of locally cut and unfinished logs. Who might have lived there? The survivors of a World War II firestorm? Or a family's last domicile before the concentration camp? But the resonance of Backes's solitary structures in the gallery settings of these current exhibitions can be unnerving in a different way. As is clear from fairy tales of several traditions, a small house in the woods is not always a sanctuary.

Also scattered between these two concurrent shows are spirit dwellings of a smaller scale, meant to reflect the many possible dimensions of their inhabitants. Several of them, floorless and roofless, like stilt dollhouses for indigenous tribes, are compact illusions of security. Other of Backes's miniatures, including a trio of opaque acrylic houses, reach back to Etruscan urns in the shape of huts, and clay towers from early Chinese graves. Another variation on this smaller scale is a piece of shaped neon that evokes the "little pink houses" that are the dream of America in a John Mellencamp song.

In her paintings, Backes reveals peninsulas of bark, with ridges and furrows that appear to be the result of carving rather than time. Overturning the cliché, she can see the forest through the trees, reducing the entire landscape to precise patches of growth and aging. By magnifying our attention, she finds grace, rather than the devil, in the details. One series on long, narrow panels register as each tree's coffin, made of itself. The acrylic on wood painting, which registers as nonsense marks up close, like a Chuck Close portrait, mutates into sense as the viewer steps away.



Above: Joan Backes, *Home*, 2012, hand-waxed poplar, 9½ x 8 x 6'.
 Right: Joan Backes, *TREE, Halifax, NS*, 2012, acrylic on panel, 24 x 18".

Birch trees are the constant subject, etched by nature as they are. In a series of drawings that Backes has executed over the past two years, the effect is as if the trunk had been inked and then rolled like a Babylonian seal across the surface of the paper. The results read as cloud shadows, recording the sky's cardiogram. And a *Tall (White) Papier-mâché Tree* made earlier this year suggests Isamu Noguchi in its refinement and might serve as a prototype for those bare branches awaiting one leaf or two on a set for Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*.

But *Home* remains at the center of it all. And if one thinks of Henry David Thoreau's cabin at Walden Pond, it becomes not merely a model, but a livable dwelling. When Thoreau reflected on what it meant to build a house, he was moved to discover "how slight a structure is absolutely necessary." This is at the very center of what I take to be Backes's abiding interest. Instead of erecting a collection of "empty chambers for empty guests," as Thoreau described the trophy residences of his day, he fashions a "frame, so slightly clad" that



it "was a sort of crystallization around me...suggestive somewhat as a picture in outlines." This is a precise enough description of Joan Backes's work. As Thoreau before her, she "drives life into a corner," quite literally, and finds there the geometry of where we belong.

—Stephen Vincent Kobasa