

Erica Baum

DISPATCH

For about a decade Erica Baum has quietly been making work, intimate black-and-white photographs that, in their selective focus and cropping, isolate uncanny textual coincidences in card-catalogue drawers and book indexes. The result is a kind of found concrete poetry, as in her "Index" series from 2000, one piece in which reads: NIAGARA FALLS, 207 / NICOTINE, 260 / NIGHT AIR, 302 / NIGHTMARES, 298 / NINETY-NINE, 379.

In the recent body of work she exhibited at Dispatch, a small storefront gallery on Henry Street, Baum continues to frame strategically. The photographs' titles, such as *Shampoo*, *Nixon and Pat*, and *Amnesia*, correspond to the subjects of the movie novelizations, celebrity biographies, and other popular-interest, nonfiction dime-store paperbacks being shown. Baum shoots the books from the side, opened slightly and standing upright, so that only the pages' dyed turquoise or vermilion edges, a few centimeters of yellowing paper, and occasional fragments of texts and images are visible. Fixed by the camera's lens, the spaces between the fanned pages are flattened, the bits of content Baum has chosen to reveal no longer isolated on separate pages but displayed within the same frame. Free-associative new readings are made possible, derived from, though not necessarily faithful to, the book's original narrative. In *Jaws*, 2008, for example, the namesake movie's mayor—whose ruinous, money-driven decision not to warn his public of shark attacks brings him no personal harm—appears as an image drowning in a turbid run of irregularly spaced turquoise and off-white striations.

The artist is, in a sense, playing with registers of fiction and fact: She presents the imaginary in material form, photographing books with documentary clarity and without digital or darkroom intervention, yet she frames their information to manifest other fictive narratives.

"The Photograph is *flat*, platitudinous in the true sense of the word," as Barthes says in *Camera Lucida*, elaborating with words by Blanchot: "[T]he essence of the image is to be . . . without signification, yet summing up the depth of any possible meaning." In another sense, Baum enacts a basic *dérive*—something akin to Constant's topological reconfiguration of cities or Cory Arcangel's "misuse" of A/V equipment. By using books "incorrectly"—physically folding their pages, interrupting their normal function to collapse their original narrative—she forges other paths through them, generating alternative relationships to the words and graphics they contain.

It is significant that Baum has chosen to show this body of work at Dispatch, a venue participating in New York's cultural dialogue in ways that resonate with her own handling of language and signs. Trafficking literature and recordings by Metronome Press, Primary Information, and Tris Vonna-Michell, and bringing together collaborations with less classifiable participants in the city's various cultural conversations, such as design director/editor Matthew Eberhart and curator/writer Hanne Mugaas, Dispatch operates more as a nexus of information than as a proper gallery or nonprofit. While Baum's poetics call to mind the satisfying formal simplicity found in Fluxus work, her images here—tastefully framed, matted, and prepared for the acts of commerce that will keep this kind of arts nexus alive—are appealing perhaps less in themselves than in their proximity to a way of thinking and a current viable set of aesthetics.

—Caroline Busta

Erica Baum,
Jaws, 2008,
color photograph,
18½ x 16⅝".

