

ARTFORUM

Erica Baum and Libby Rothfeld

BUREAU

178 Norfolk Street

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Four photographs document veils of chalk dust on abused blackboards. Abandoned bits of hastily written text appear everywhere. Chalk gathers in the slates' cracks, while drips of water vanquish any worthwhile messages. Erica Baum gets intimate with these relics of language and pedagogy. She captures every detail, as if she's quietly recording the discovery of a new language.

Baum made her "Blackboard" series, 1994–96, while studying at Yale. She photographed these slates in empty classrooms to reveal images—perhaps culled from the university's subconscious—that get made when written language is destroyed, obscured, misremembered. Baum's photographs are paired with Libby Rothfeld's sculptural arrangements, visual riddles that seek out elusive answers. The tiled platforms of her floor-based "Option" sculptures, 2016, are stages for indifferent-looking clay faces in bas-relief, shot glasses half-filled with fake resin spirits, and shopping baskets nearly overflowing with sprouting raw potatoes. Her wall-mounted "Label" pieces, 2016, employ anodyne tiles similar to the floor pieces. They boast, prominently and unintelligibly, alphanumeric codes and warnings from the US surgeon general about the deleterious effects of alcohol for pregnant women.

Rothfeld's and Baum's texts call to mind the work of poet Ingeborg Bachmann, who once wrote that there can be "no new world without a new language." These artists create aesthetic situations that feel circuitous, enigmatic, impossible. Another cipher can be found in the exhibition's title, "AAa: Quien," which seems to simply inquire, "AAa: Who?" A new world, Rothfeld and Baum suggest, begins with you.



View of "Erica Baum and Libby Rothfeld: AAa: Quien," 2017.

— Kaitlyn A. Kramer