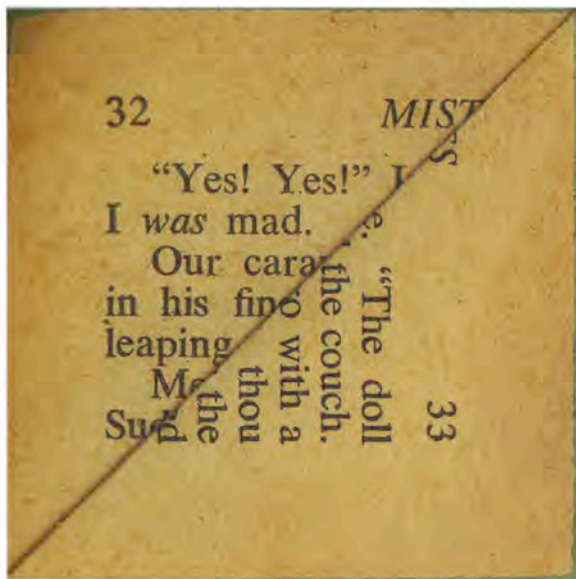


Random Harvest



Mad (Dog Ear) (2009)

BY KATHLEEN MADDEN

Clues and oblique references proliferate in Erica Baum's photography. Working generally in black and white or with only slight traces of color, Baum recycles ephemeral language-based sources, such as chalkboards, indexes, card catalogs, board games, player piano rolls, and books, especially of the pulp variety. Baum photographs juxtapositions of printed matter in a direct, clinical manner, forensically examined at the minute level, which are then extrapolated through the viewer's imagination to become much more than the sum of their parts. Having been educated in anthropology, Baum's work can be understood as a form of making meaning from found information, which she meticulously sifts through.

Like the street photography of Walker Evans, Rudy Burckhardt, and Berenice Abbott, Baum depicts found, readymade language in the information landscape, a sort of topography of daily data. Her earlier *Blackboards* (1995) series is based on found marks in classrooms at Yale University. While much education is presented as absolute and verifiable, works like *Untitled (Elastic)* (1995) visit the scene after the class is dismissed. Here Baum discovers gaps between the frame and the content, and indications of meaning. We are left with a cipher, perhaps never to be fully explained. While she works with what she finds, Baum has such a specific eye that there is a visible cohesion about what she produces, pure formal order. Consistently she captures images that provoke polymorphous interpretation.

In as much as she investigates systematized language, a card catalog, index, etc., this is not a language of administration like Hanne Darboven. Instead it is a seductive language of projected fantasies that combine abstract forms while harnessing the perceptual processes. This is evidenced in both the *Index* (1999) and the *Frick* (1998) series, where words reference other words and or visual taxonomies. The *Frick* series is based on an outmoded cataloging of themes and details in paintings. If a painting contained the following: dragon flies, moths, bird tits, melons, pomegranates, grapes, walnuts and nasturtiums as listed in *Untitled (Dragon-Flies)* (1998), it would be located by the card that Baum has photographed, in this instance with a medium-format camera at the Frick Museum of Art in New York in her forensic style.

Baum's is a strategy that highlights the viewing experience. She projects what can't be shown. Like Hollywood during the code, Baum generates ideas rather than explicitly exposing the lurid action. Her 2013 series *The Naked Eye* takes illustrated paperbacks with stippled book edges and evocative snapshots as subject matter. She splays open the books so that the pages fan out. Although not completely exposed, the position permits her to capture glimpses of snatched information. It is a voyeuristic formula that provokes fictional intrigue, a poetic gesture to literary allusions. *House: Naked Eye, Vol. 2* (2012), shows a peaked-roof suburban structure sand-



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wiched between abstracted striations—fragmented snippets of other images and text pages from the book isolate the house. We can project onto this arrangement a sense of domestic life. Are we viewing a scene of lonely seclusion, one fraught with tension and emotional struggle, or do joy and ecstasy reside at this address? Like Rachel Whiteread's *House* (1993), the archetypical site of domestic habitation is one in which memories accumulate, but Baum's work is open-ended like a Rorschach test, leaving interpretation to the viewer. We write ourselves into the stories suggested by these images.

Sometimes cultural references impart the visual stimulation, such as in the *Viewmaster* (2011) series, which is imbued with popular culture and would be relatable even if the stories and characters were unfamiliar. Snippets of text narrate the drama and as with the blanks, the images are opaque. "Through the salon window we see a giant octopus," as if we are located within House. Baum creates an extended stage for her narratives to take place. The *Viewmasters* are circular and a haptic sense of holding gives these works an intimacy, which on the wall is more distant and graphically bold.

Ultimately, language is Baum's core subject matter, she explains: "In my pictures, preexisting signifiers yield new signifieds." Unlike the conceptual art of Joseph Kosuth and Lawrence Weiner, Baum does not highlight the limitations and exhaustion of language. Rather she creates a scene that is replete with meaning, like a daydream. As in *Untitled (Hunting)* (1996) from the *Card Catalog* (1996) series, Baum is constantly gathering information, seemingly like a random

harvest, but ultimately as a means of propelling her very specific vision of the world and suggesting to each spectator a projection of her or his own sense of imagination.

Baum's *Dog Ear* (2010) series is another instance of the book as a readymade, replete with the found material of word on page. Baum selectively turns down the page of a book, as if to mark the spot, finding unexpected language that provides subliminal poetry. Generating a good *Dog Ear* is not easy—the pages get turned down, "photographed" through a scanner, and then printed before the process of culling begins. This is followed by an extended process with a heavy rejection rate, whereby Baum's criteria is to achieve expressive *Dog Ears*. These photographs are about an intersection of the visual form through reading.

A sub-genre of the *Dog Ears*, the *Blanks* (2013) series reference in their title the books from which they originate, such as *The Dangerous Assassins* (2012), although in this series Baum features a more abstract and oblique deployment of language than she did in *Dog Ears*, where the title originates from text in the image. In *Blanks*, no text is seen, but we know we are looking at a book. Even with these more formal images, language remains potent with rich ambiguities referring to the unseen. Yet the evidence Baum provides insinuates a way for each viewer to project onto the image. Tapping into the conventions of street photography, she proposes an intimate world based on the language of the past, while projecting contemporary imaginations.