

# Art in America

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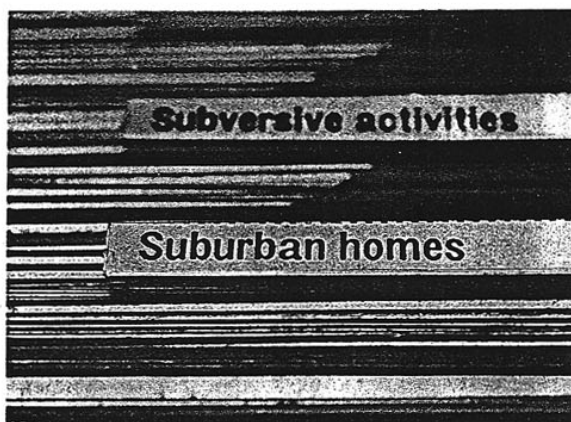
## Erica Baum at Clementine

As libraries make the transition to computerized catalogues, many still rely on drawers of index cards. In most respects card catalogues are no match for computer databases, but the quaintly fastidious cards, smudged by the fingers of past researchers, remain far more likely to yield serendipitous discoveries and seem to have far more appeal as raw material for art works. One of several artists currently focusing on card catalogues, Erica Baum approaches them with a linguist's eye for found poetry, discovering unintended relationships in random names and phrases filed in alphabetical order. While Baum is obviously well-versed in language theory, her black-and-white photographs of outmoded catalogues have a dry wit typically lacking in post-structuralist iscourse about archives.

Take, for example, Baum's photo of an open drawer with tab dividers placing "fasts and feasts" so close to "fat," with "fate and fatalism" looming just out of focus in the background. Separated only by the edges of well-riffled cards, the subject headings are loaded. Finding the McCarthyite "subversive activities" so close to the benign category of "suburban homes," Baum invokes Cold War politics. Indexing associates terms only by chance, but chance can yield its own odd logic. Take, for example, Baum's photos of drawers with contents such as "Jersey City—Jesus" or "Sex Differences—Shirts." Always ready to exploit the readymade joke by contrasting the sublime with the mundane, she exposes a Dadaist absurdity perhaps closer to Fluxus puns than to Duchampian metaphysics.

These spare texts underscore the particular esthetic appeal of Baum's images: visually based on receding series of horizontal lines, the photos of rows of cards, still ranged in their file drawers, have a hard-edged, minimalist quality that suits her conceptual bent. But at the same time, the topics identified by the cards—such as "fasts and feasts" with its implication of body states—emphasize content, a different artistic preference.

Textual without becoming didactic, Baum's linguistic play is informed by our era: post-structuralist, postfeminist and post-Foucauldian, Baum enters the library conscious of her place in history. The imposed limitations of this body of work may imply a limited focus, but Baum emerges as an artist to be watched. —Grady T. Turner



Erica Baum: *Untitled (Suburban)*, 1997, gelatin silver print, 20 by 24 inches; at Clementine.