

Erica Baum is fascinated by the printed word. Whether scavenging newspaper clippings, vintage paperbacks, or half-cleaned chalkboards, she reveals unexpected poetry in the language that permeates everyday life. She approaches these materials almost scientifically, creating discrete but concurrent series of images that straightforwardly document their sources. Conjuring her objects of study through fragmentary details, shot in close-up and with shallow depth of field, Baum evokes an intimate space in which viewers can decipher the images according to their own associations and memories. Her works accentuate this character by highlighting manifestations of language marked by obsolescence, such as lyrics appearing on player-piano rolls. The *Card Catalogue* series pictures its eponymous subject in extreme detail, focusing on just a few subject markers amid rows of index cards bearing information related to those topics. In Baum's hands these headings seem to hover against an abstract visual field, like ghostly relics of a pre-digital era—a point made all the more succinctly in her topic selection for *Untitled (Apparitions)* (1997).

An admirer of concrete poetry, Baum takes up Brion Gysin's exhortation that "words have a vitality of their own and you or anybody can make them gush into action." Photography provides a means for her to combine the chance effects of Gysin's cut-up method with her own reverence for the materiality of the printed page. In the *Dog Ear* series she ingeniously fuses these verbal and visual qualities by photographing the folded corners of book pages. Works like *Differently* (2009) and *Enfold* (2013) draw attention to the physical layout of margins, page numbers, line spacing, and font design while transforming their found texts into syncopated blocks of signification *in potentia*. The regular folds that cut diagonals across each square frame recall the formal rigor of Minimalism even as they reference the more subjective act of marking significant passages in old books. Baum draws out the luscious physicality of these common objects: the various textures of woven paper, the yellowing tones of age, the hint of ink bleeding through thin pages.

In the *Naked Eye* series, Baum photographs old softcovers from the side, choosing to show their pages rather than the spines, and fanning the pages out to create mysterious chance juxtapositions. Words appear sliced or foreshortened, giving way to flattened strips of images—film starlets, clouds, fragments of buildings—that, as in *Amnesia* (2009), are sandwiched between the rippling and vividly dyed edges of surrounding pages. Bereft of caption and context, these illustrations take over the role of displaced signifier previously held by catalog keywords like *daggers* and *cloaks*. Digging through old books on cinema for works like *Flint* (2009) and *Clara* (2013), Baum selects anonymous figures who either cast oblique glances off the frame of the page or seem poised for the gaze. Leaving their narratives necessarily unresolved, she spins a web of longing that resonates with her own attraction to the source material. Through these open-ended investigations Baum honors the tradition of print—that textured, tangible objectification of language that inexorably fades with each passing year.

Opposite, top:
Untitled (Apparitions), 1997

Opposite, bottom:
Untitled (Daggers Cloaks), 1998

Erica Baum: Wordplay

Nat Trotman

Nat Trotman is an associate curator at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.