

The poetry of word and image

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by Jacob Schermerhorn

Currently on show at the George Eastman Museum, “the bite in the ribbon—a paper show” is made up of four distinct but similar series of work from contemporary artist Erica Baum.

Baum is a photo artist from New York known for finding art and poetry in everyday objects. Beginning in the 1990s, her work has featured photographs of chalkboards, library card catalogue drawers, stipple-edged paperbacks, and newspaper articles. Her tone often contains a sense of humor juxtaposed with poignant observation and appreciation for things typically overlooked.

The George Eastman Museum exhibit title itself is a reference to Gertrude Stein’s 1914 book “Tender Buttons,” an important work to Baum.

“I love the way in which Stein takes words and they become almost like objects,” she says. “That’s a lot of what I’m doing; I’m taking words and allowing them to have life that they don’t necessarily always have in their original format.

“I love ‘a bite in the ribbon’ because that’s like a typewriter,” Baum continues. “But it’s also like ‘silk,’ which ties into the content of the work. It’s an immersion in paper and its tactile qualities.”

Displayed in the Potter Peristyle hallway outside the museum’s other galleries, there is a collection of square-framed book pages. The paper is folded at a 45-degree angle, so, as in a book, the other page is partially visible. Baum draws new meaning from that partial view both through omission and synthesis.

For example, the series “Blanks” consists of blank pages merged together. The absence of imagery invites the viewer to examine the paper’s color, texture, and tone, which form striking compositions from minimal materials.

Conversely, “Dog Ears” draws out poetry hidden in the top corners of books by combining the visible words on each page.

Baum typically reads the poems clockwise, at times omitting or completing partially displayed words. That is far from a doctrinaire rule, however, and she encourages viewers to try reading in different ways to find their own meaning.

“It’s kind of an absentminded gesture to dog-ear a book,” Baum says. “You’re running to take the kettle off the stove or something. This transforms it into something poetic.”

An audio guide for the work is included and features her readings of the poems.

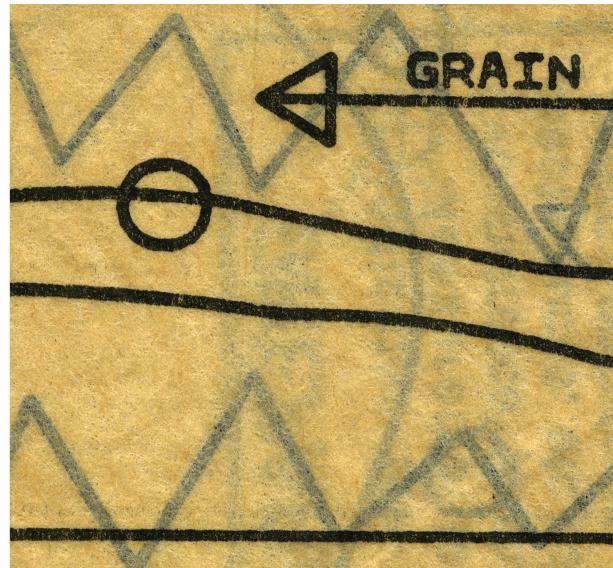
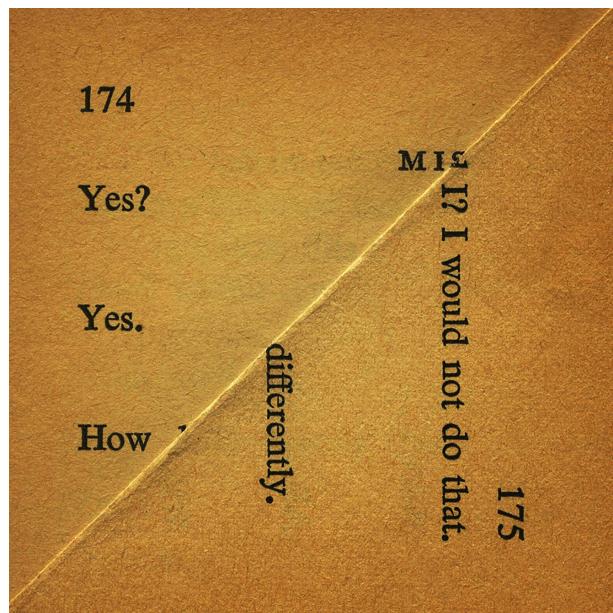
Performance was something Baum says she was initially wary of when she began the series in 2009, but she now feels coached by a poet friend.

Inside the museum’s project gallery are two more series featuring Baum’s more recent exploration of seemingly unremarkable fashion and craft materials to create new artistic meaning.

“Patterns” uses folding and layering techniques with mid-20th century clothing patterns to create abstract compositions. Folding the extremely thin, fibrous, and slightly translucent pamphlets used in these types of sewing guides creates wrinkles and alters colors, developing new imagery from an overlooked material.

“I like struggling with the material. The paper itself is massive and doesn’t behave that easily,” Baum says. “It all comes together in a way that you can’t always realize it’s folded because it is so thin. Sometimes shapes can appear blue, but that’s just because the paper itself is yellow and it colors it in this unique way.”

“Grain,” for instance, has a variety of shapes originally intended to sew along, which now create a sense of motion and dynamism. Colors alter and change hue when layered over multiple pages, creating contrast and ‘ghost’ images.



Her other series in the project gallery is “Fabrications,” which similarly uses folds and layers. The material is taken from an array of magazines, catalogs, advertisements and coupons.

“Red Tin Cat” features a grainy gray picture of a finished crafting project layered atop an abstract red shape in the background. Another grey tail-shaped rectangle hangs down the piece, perhaps attached to the cat or somehow separate. Other pieces layer thin strips of magazine pages together, creating a collage of brilliant colors.

Baum says she is fascinated by the materials she used for “Fabrications,” which typically come from the post-WWII era. On their own merits, she finds the graphic styles and colors striking in older magazines.

In addition, although they are targeted at a domestic, “stay-at-home” audience, there is still a diversity of interests on display. Cooking, crafting, fashion, decor, and more could all be within the pages. Baum notes it is at odds with the increasingly insular and siloed nature of the modern-day. A monoculture of shared experience is atypical now, unlike in the past.

Both “Patterns” and “Fabrications” are also grappling with concepts of femininity and patriarchy. While nothing is wrong with having a passion for sewing, cooking, or crafting, Baum says, they were used as tools to control women in the past.

“They were meant to be, ‘Women, get out of the factory, go back to the home. Make the home the site of all your dreams,’ ” she says.

“A feminist reading of the work is that (the materials) have been liberated from the domestic anchor of what it is meant to be,” Baum adds, using the sewing guides as an example. “It’s free from what your role as a woman should be in creating these things.”

“the bite in the ribbon—a paper show” is now on display until June 7, 2026. The show features a number of never-before-seen works made specially for this exhibition.

Baum will return to the George Eastman Museum for an artist talk event on April 1 and a members-only exhibition tour on April 2.

