

Ashley McNelis, 'An Artist Dissects Found Bits of Language,' *Hyperallergic*
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Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

GALLERIES

An Artist Dissects Found Bits of Language

by **Ashley McNelis** on March 15, 2016



Erica Baum, "Untitled (Reason), (Card Catalogue)" (1997), gelatin silver print, 16.67 x 21.5 inches (photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

Trained as an anthropologist, [Erica Baum](#) views the mundane objects integrated into our daily lives as artifacts that can reveal larger meanings. Her photographic work merges this anthropological background with an interest in linguistics, literature, and language. In her solo exhibition *The Following Information* at Bureau, she decontextualizes and reconstructs found language — handwritten, typed, or referenced — in three series of black-and-white

photographs: two from the 1990s, *Blackboards* and *Card Catalogue*, juxtaposed with her most recent work, *Fields*. Though most of her images are, surprisingly, unaltered, they appear ambiguous and possibly fictive. The viewer then becomes the anthropologist while piecing together the elements that form Baum's playful, lyrical, and meditative work.

As an anthropological experiment, Baum turned her large-format camera lens onto classroom blackboards while in graduate school at Yale. The resulting work, *Blackboards*, indexically preserved the ephemeral chalk and eraser markings of past lectures. When she couldn't photograph in classrooms during finals, she retreated to the library. There, she searched for coincidental and humorous combinations of text in the card catalogues. While the *Blackboards* series is more elegiac in manner, *Card Catalogue* is more playful with words; an image from the latter series, for example, captures the proximity of the reference card "Once..." with one several rows below it, titled "Onassis, Jacqueline Kennedy."



Installation view of 'Erica Baum: The Following Information' at Bureau (image courtesy Bureau)

Each photograph in *Blackboard* and *Card Catalogue* contains a type of print, whether handwritten or typed. Completed before we started consuming and disseminating information digitally, the two series now nostalgically remind us of a not-so-distant past. Interspersed between these two series are photographs from *Fields*: digital C-prints of close-up details from illustrations in old paperback books. Whether from the poor quality of the paperbacks or as a result of the lens's zoomed-in and intimate perspective, the blown-up landscapes have become blurred abstractions.

From her funny combinations of card catalogue tabs, to the clouds in a *Fields* photograph, to the cumulus-like erasure marks in *Blackboards*, Baum's works require a closer look to find the value in the banal. In playing the role of anthropologist, she seeks to preserve the imagery of disappearing practices and forgotten publications in our oversaturated world of image generation, (re-)use, and circulation.



Erica Baum, "Untitled (Wave), (Blackboards)" (1995) (detail), gelatin silver print, 20 x 24 inches (image courtesy Bureau)

Viewing her surroundings with a documentary approach, a wry sense of humor, and an attention to detail, Baum is inspired by the incidental use of found language in the street photography of Brassai, Eugène Atget, and Walker Evans, as well the humorous and conceptually driven work of artists Ed Ruscha, Lawrence Weiner, and Sol LeWitt. Her work also aligns with that of contemporary artists who concern themselves with the digital age by returning to older processes, formats, and subject matter. In *Everyday Epiphanies* at the Metropolitan Museum, Baum's work was in conversation with artists Elizabeth McAlpine and Brandon Lattu, whose work similarly artistic processes to reflect on the digital turn. For *Reloaded – Concrete tendencies today*, at the Weserberg Museum of Modern Art in Bremen, Germany, an exhibition on the resurgence of Concrete Poetry in art, Baum showed alongside photographer [Natalie Czech](#). To different ends, Czech, like Baum, photographs found language (often after manipulating the source) and gives importance to quotidian objects. Finally, Baum is currently one of the 10 contemporary photographers included in the conceptually oriented *Photo-Poetics: An Anthology* at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. There she is framed as being one of many artists who has returned to the traditional questions of photography — such as replication, representation, and the role of the object — while simultaneously generating ideas and subject matter that are very much of our time.



Installation view of 'Erica Baum: The Following Information' at Bureau (image courtesy Bureau) (click to enlarge)

Baum's work is based in the materiality of her found sources and medium: the lack of manipulation in her close-up and careful shots of physical objects returns photography to its roots. In revisiting or reconfiguring the banal in our world, *Blackboards*, *Card Catalogue*, and *Fields* make clear that, despite our immersion in digital methods of communication, we are still drawn to older forms of transmitting language and imagery. Fortunately, looking closely at Baum's work to intuit such realities is both challenging and rewarding like reading a good book.



Installation view of 'Erica Baum: The Following Information' at Bureau (image courtesy Bureau) (click to enlarge)

[Erica Baum: The Following Information](#) continues at Bureau (178 Norfolk Street, Lower East Side, Manhattan) through March 27.

Bureau Erica Baum

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