

IMPULSE

Erica Baum

Face to Face: November 2025

By Will Heinrich



Erica Baum, *Edge 33 (Patterns)*, 2019. Archival pigment print 16 × 17.48 in. Image courtesy of the artist and Bureau.

Erica Baum is getting baroque. As an Upper West Side teenager haunting Colosseum books, she looked for experimental new releases from Grove Press or New Directions. As a Barnard College anthropology major, she encountered Japanese poetry and was deeply struck by its ability to isolate weightless yet evocative images. (It's no coincidence that her narrow Soho loft feels like a book-lined airship à la Hayao Miyazaki.) As an aspiring young painter and collagist with a day job at the Parks Department, she was tasked with installing Social Realist murals, which put her off painting. But another part of the job, documenting the work of civilian volunteers, got her started with a camera.

After getting herself up to speed on photography with classes at SVA and library books, she earned an MFA in the discipline at Yale in 1994. "I felt I had to commit to something," she told me. There, she discovered her first muse in the form of half-erased blackboards. Her deadpan photos of these intentionally temporary relics of thinking and speaking are as easy to read—and as discreetly profound—as moonlight on a wintry lake or William Carlos Williams. Like haiku, they highlight a small-scale mortality to evoke a larger one. But instead of changing seasons or the inevitability of death, it's a hastily-scrawled word like "SIMBOLISMO" bringing out the fleeting, performative, accidental nature of even the most authentic of human creative expression, which, when you think about it, is pretty funny.



Image courtesy of the artist.

Baum's incisive but indirect humor and her eye for subtle beauty developed further in series like *Dog Ear* (2009–) and *Card Catalogues* (1996–98). In the former, dog-eared pages of books she's reading, one against the other, become elegant little compositions of concrete poetry. In the latter, the accidental juxtapositions of library organization become loving deflations of Western culture, as when a category title like "Reason" or "God" sits over a gray-tone landscape of humble index cards, or become mordant revelations of our collective unconscious, as when "Subversive Activities," slightly out of focus, sits just above a crisp "Suburban Homes."

Even as she was making minimal, restrained work, though, Baum's youthful interest in color and collage lay waiting to return. In the windowless square studio built into the center of her loft, Baum showed me stacks of the gaudy old pulp novels she uses to make her more recent *Naked Eye* (2008–) photos—loud, vertically-striped express trains through the history of advertising and cinema. And her new exhibition at the Eastman Museum in Rochester is filled with gloriously colorful new works from her *Patterns* (2018–) and *Fabrications* (2023–) series, which use vintage textile patterns and magazines to create photographs that sit somewhere between early op art and late Matisse. In *Patterns* and *Fabrications*, Baum also intervenes more actively in her materials, cutting and arranging in a way she never would have done on a blackboard. But it's all right; at this point, she knows how to protect an accidental meaning, even when she's staged it herself.