

GALERIE CREVECOEUR

9 RUE DES CASCADES

75020 PARIS

Erica Baum
Stanzas
9/18 - 10/31/15

Interview of Erica Baum, September 2015, Paris.

C - In the show you present some *Blackboards*, the oldest series in your career. How would you describe them? And do you share this feeling I have that they already announce everything that is present in all your series afterwards?

EB - When I was in Graduate school for photography at Yale, I started photographing school life there and I did a whole series of photographs of students and students' life. I started to pay attention to the textures and words around the students, and because I had studied anthropology and linguistics, I was sensitive to the institutions and the structures they were working in. When I started photographing the blackboards, it was a key moment for me because I realized I was able to draw upon my interest in language and my interest in anthropology and give it a more abstract visual experience. For the first time, it became my voice.

What I was seeing were the traces of the lectures, what was left on the blackboard by the teacher, the echo of all the learning that was taking place. It felt like a mystery, like you were getting this sense of something that had happened but that was not for us, that was in between, that was for someone else. But in photographing it, I was capturing a moment that was meant to be erased. Taking something very ephemeral and anchoring it in a photograph, something that is in flux and arrest it. Inside these fields of indeterminate language, I felt I was drawing upon ideas I had learnt about in linguistics, about the signifier and the signified and separating those two. For the first time I felt like I had found something that was a route to my own voice in photography.

C - It is interesting what you say about the institutions, the way that the knowledge is registered, disseminated in our world.

EB - I became more conscious of that with the *Card Catalogue* work, over time, but even with the *Blackboards*, there was this sense of a system for imparting knowledge. I was giving a chance for us to be aware of that system but not point to it too specifically. What interests me are the layers of references and the fact that you can get a sense of that particular environment that it came from, but without fully giving you that environment. When I speak of structures, I mean structures that happen in universities where people come and they learn something. But I am giving you an oblique angle at that structure. I want you to be aware of these visual fields you are immersed in. It comes from an actual blackboard and an actual system of knowledge, but it is taken on its own.

C - One of your most iconic series is *The Naked Eye*. It is the object of a publication which will be released in October, published by Bureau and oe/Crevecoeur. Can you tell me, starting from *The Naked Eye*, what are the links, in terms of methodology and system, between the different series that you present in the show?

EB - One of the ways in which I believe all the works are linked is that I tend to approach everything based on the idea is that these are things people encounter in everyday life. Starting with the *Blackboards*, which come from an actual situation, there is - and it is a phrase I have used before -, an unmanipulated route to abstraction.

There is a direct encounter with something we all see, we all know and yet you suddenly see in a different way. I want that duality: In an ordinary action, you can create something extraordinary.

C - You search for epiphanies.

I was in an exhibit at the Met, called 'Everyday Epiphanies'! This is exactly what I am thinking, I mean hoping.

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For example with the *Dog Ears*, the idea comes from the actual act of reading. When I am ready to stop, I fold the corner and that is my way of saving my place. I am trying to give you a different experience of something that we already do. I take that approach as a generating standpoint for a lot of different things that I am doing.

With the *Naked Eyes*, you are also experiencing the constraints of a sequence of pages, but in a simple matter of opening up the book and glancing it from different angles. It is that glance in that creates these different juxtapositions. But it is existing!

It is that tension between something that exists, that we encounter and the fact that we can look at it in a different way that creates a strangeness, a difference in which exist endless potentials. It started with the *Blackboards*. You walk across a blackboard, you stop and then you look again and you realize: within these things that I thought I recognized I can have a different experience.

The *Fields*, a new series in the exhibition are works that are appropriated from old books. So again, it is finding something new within something that we already have. Incorporated in that series are also photographs that I take myself. In that case, I am considering this idea of circularity: it can be appropriated, it can be used, the way that images cycle in our world. It is something we are all aware of now because of the ubiquity of imagery and generating imagery.

What is interesting is that the *Fields* are all black and white, and that gives a slightly different registrar. Now more than ever, a black and white photograph is a conscious choice. Initially with photography everything was in black and white, that was the default. It took a long time for color to become a practice that photographers took seriously. Now most of the images that we see are in color. To choose to do something black and white with the *Fields* is a conscious choice.

With the *Blackboards*, in 1994-1996, I was working with a large format view camera, I wanted to work with a large scale camera, I wanted to do dark room work. It made sense that it was black and white. And then with the *Naked Eyes*, it made sense that it was in color.

The *Stills* are something that operates somewhere between the *Dog Ears* and the *Naked Eyes*. Because I have been working so long now with printed matter, I am very conscious of the colors, the textures of paper, the registrar of the images and the different kinds of reproducing printed matter. There is an interesting level of attention to all of these aspects of the subjects in the *Stills*.

C - What is the work for selecting one image in particular, from all the images you take?

For every series, I bring my process back to the dark room process, in the initial way of photographing. Because of its process, there was a time delay between the moment of photographing, the moment where the image is revealed and the moment the decisions are made. A similar amount of time takes place for me in all the projects, even now that they are not in the dark room. I have recognized that I benefit from that time. Having a space between making the image and then later thinking about it helps because you can be more hard on yourself, on the decisions.

I make many images. And the editing takes a long time. The very fact that I am making so many images, many more than I would have made with a large-format camera and a large negative means that I am spending a lot of time processing through my decisions. In a way, the time is about the same as it was in the early dark room. The criteria for choosing only gets harder, even though I benefit from having a better understanding of what I am doing.

C - "Stanzas" suggests a poetic form. Photography etymologically means "writing" with the "light". In an interview you gave to Art In America in 2013, you mentioned that your first desire was to be a writer. It seems that becoming a photographer has been a natural evolution from that.

I would say that photography has been a way to channel all those streams of interest for me: anthropology, literature, and art. I always have been a big reader and when I was growing up, I wanted to be a writer. But I always painted and took pictures. When I was in my twenties, I decided to pursue photography specifically. And photography became a way for me to write.

Stanzas, the title of the show came when I was thinking about the way the show has been organized with many different sections. Stanzas are parts of the same poem, and they also have their own form. For me it is an homage to reading and thinking about language. An homage to an engagement with language, with printed matter, with ways that you can find things visually within that. *Stanzas* is a way to tie in that idea of literature.