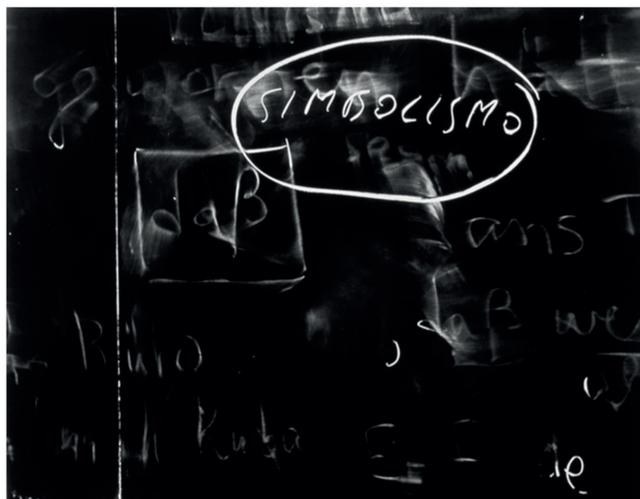


Rajesh Parameswaran, *BOMB Magazine*, Issue #153, 2020

# BOMB

## Erica Baum by Rajesh Parameswaran



*Untitled (Simbolismo)*, 1994, (Blackboards), gelatin silver print, 20 x 24 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Bureau, New York.

Erica Baum's photographs examine the ways we use language to classify, index, and assert knowledge. Working primarily with obsolescent media from the twentieth century—card catalogs, player piano rolls, sewing patterns—Baum isolates serendipitous interactions among fragments of text and the surrounding visual field. Her carefully disorienting framing, as well as her more active interventions, grant a poetic charge to these encounters. Characters scrawled across a blackboard stab confidently at meaning yet seem as ephemeral as the clouds of chalk dust from which they emerge.

A series of subject dividers in a card catalog drawer appear to issue a wry critique of contemporary life. The diagonal folding of a paperback's acid-browned page mates facing sections of text, creating a startling, origami-like poem. Baum finds both grace and absurdity in visual language—words slip between their meaning and material presence, and textual artifacts take on the beautiful strangeness of cave paintings.

Baum's work brings to mind the cut-up poetry of William Burroughs, the media-scavenging of the Pictures Generation, the text-based art of Lawrence Weiner, and the graffiti photographs of Brassai. But the visual and verbal lyricism of this work and its affectionate, dry wit are distinctly Baum's. Her work hangs in the collections of the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, among others.

I've known Erica Baum for years, as her former student at Yale and as her friend. We now live across the East River from each other, but we spoke this past June over Zoom, while the grim isolation of lockdown restrictions gave way to a massive social movement in defense of Black lives.

—Rajesh Parameswaran

**Erica Baum**

I'm here. I'm just trying to get my video on.

**Rajesh Parameswaran**

If you tap the screen, there should be a video icon.

**EB**

Oh. Hi.

**RP**

What is that behind you? It looks like burled wood.

**EB**

It's a huge table that somebody had thrown away. Tim, my husband, found it on the street in Midtown, and he rolled it all the way home. We mostly keep it against the wall. It's a good background for Zoom. There's no other part of our house that isn't crazy messy, so...

**RP**

That's the weird thing about these Zoom meetings—having to expose your living space, however chaotic it may be. How have the last few months been for you? There's the pandemic, and now the protests. I don't know if it's been affecting your artistic practice, but it must be affecting you.

**EB**

I was in Germany in March because I had a show at Klemm's gallery in Berlin and then another one that was opening at Markus Lüttgen in Düsseldorf, where there was a higher concentration of cases. I was really nervous about going, and I ended up cutting my trip short and arrived back in New York on March 11—the same evening they announced they were no longer allowing people in from Europe. Both exhibitions went on, though, and the galleries have been wonderful.

**RP**

Wow.

**EB**

So I got home just before the chaos at the airports. I was really stressed out, but gradually I became calmer and was able to start working again. Then, in May, Forma Arts and Media in London invited me to participate with the writer Idra Novey in a curated project that we called *too soon to tell*. It was initially about addressing quarantine and the pandemic, but as we were working we were suddenly in this different historical moment with the Black Lives Matter protests.

Often my work doesn't address things with such immediacy. I generally make meta-commentary, but in this case we were writing in the moment, and the moment was changing as we were doing it.

**RP**

What was the nature of your collaboration?

**EB**

I would send her a couple of my newspaper clipping works and she would write in response, and then I would proceed to develop more images while thinking about her writing. We did this back and forth, and then we worked out a sequence. What was exciting for me was that the immediacy of the newspaper clippings allowed me to process this intense transition from quiet isolation to everybody being in the streets. It was cathartic.

## Crèvecœur

**RP**

So you studied anthropology through the lens of art?

**EB**

I did and I didn't. In high school, we were allowed to take college classes for free all over the city. I signed up for a class in animal behavior at the New School, but it turned out they weren't offering it, so I took anthropology instead. It was a great class. By the time I started at Barnard I knew I wanted to major in anthropology. Growing up in a neighborhood with people from different backgrounds spurred my interest in other cultures. I always knew there were different ways of doing things because my neighborhood was not homogenous at all.

By the time I graduated from college, I was more interested in literature and art. I was still interested in anthropology, but I didn't want to contribute to the field academically.

**RP**

There is an anthropological aspect to your work, in the sense that your art is a study of cultural practices.

**EB**

Absolutely. When I started the blackboard work at Yale—which was kind of my breakthrough work as a graduate student—I was initially photographing students and student life.

**RP**

Yes, I recall...

**EB**

What I loved about that project was having access to different worlds. Studying anthropology helped me be more conscious of and question my place in relationship to the different worlds I was learning about; are you an observer, a participant observer, or a member of a community? I brought those questions to Yale. Through my access as a graduate student, I became more interested in the environment that the students were in, and that's what led me to photographing the blackboards.

**RP**

Those blackboard works seem so directly connected to graffiti and street art—although they're very indoors and rarified, given their setting in an Ivy League university. They're reminiscent of Brassai's photographs of graffiti, and even Basquiat's work. What is your process like now? Do you bring objects into the studio and photograph them there?

**EB**

Yeah, that's more or less what evolved. Back then, I took the large-format view camera to empty classrooms to find blackboards I could use. And one day all the classrooms were occupied, so I brought the camera and the lights to the library. That's how I began photographing the card catalogs. The photos from the *Frick* series, which followed in 1998, were taken at the Frick Art Reference Library. After that, I started a project called *Index*. I was looking at the indices in books and thinking about the poetry that arises when you look at them in a different context. That was the first time I worked with objects that were on a scale that I could bring home. Since then I've mostly worked with things I can handle, but they still tend to be things I find out in the world. So even when I'm photographing in the studio, my artwork is related to the wider world.

I like to have distance between when I'm photographing, when I'm making the work, and when I'm editing. Separating those moments of art-making is critical. In the moment, I might think something is really exciting and interesting, but later I'm able to be more dispassionate and judge more critically. Analog photography—where you don't know what you have until you've made contact sheets and work prints—and those steps that delay are actually useful to me. With a digital camera, even though I can see an image in the moment, it's still not the right moment for me to work with that image. That's also parallel to the fact that I often don't want to give you too much information about the source. If I'm using a book, I'm not telling you the book's title because I don't want the work to be weighed down by it. I want you to have a feeling for the source, but I want the work to be free to go somewhere else.

**RP**

Although I do see social commentary as implicit in your work, it's often at a remove of time. So that must have been an interesting change.

**EB**

There's still a temporal slippage in *too soon to tell*. It can be read in different ways.

**RP**

Have you been participating in the marches?

**EB**

The first protest I joined was a march up Broadway, from Foley Square to Washington Square Park. I've continued to participate—I've been going to protests regularly for years—but because of the virus I'm more cautious. There have also been days when I basically walked into a protest because people have been marching in every direction, all over the city, all the time. You either join intentionally, or the protests find you.

**RP**

You've been documenting some of the street art and signage from the protests.

**EB**

In the beginning of June, there were a couple of nights of intense looting, and we were up all night listening to people coming and going. I went out the next day and photographed the aftermath. Within a day or two, everything was boarded up. And then people started decorating all the boards. And now, as places are reopening, the boards are coming down. All of this has been happening really fast. At every step, I feel like what I'm documenting won't last.

**RP**

Can you talk a little about growing up in New York City and how it has informed your work?

**EB**

I grew up on Ninety-Sixth Street, between Amsterdam and Columbus, in a Mitchell-Lama (which is a kind of affordable housing) in the '60s and '70s. I had a lot of friends that were artists and musicians, and my boyfriend at the time, Arturo O'Farrill Jr., was an Afro-Cuban jazz musician who came from a family of jazz musicians. It was a very artistic atmosphere and a really nice mixture of people. For my last two years of high school I went to City-as-School, which was an alternative public high school. Jean-Michel Basquiat went there, and that's when he started doing his SAMO tag. I had other friends who did their artwork on the street, but the SAMO thing was brilliant. So I grew up with a feeling for the ways the streets and text could be generative for artistic creation.

**RP**

Did you know Basquiat?

**EB**

Sure. It was a small school, and we all used to hang out. The school was on Schermerhorn Street in Downtown Brooklyn. I took a figure drawing class with Jean-Michel at the Y, where Roulette is now. In twelfth grade, I had an internship in SoHo, and one day I was walking on Prince Street and Jean-Michel called me over to show me the artwork he was selling on the street, small postcards or something. I wish I had bought one.

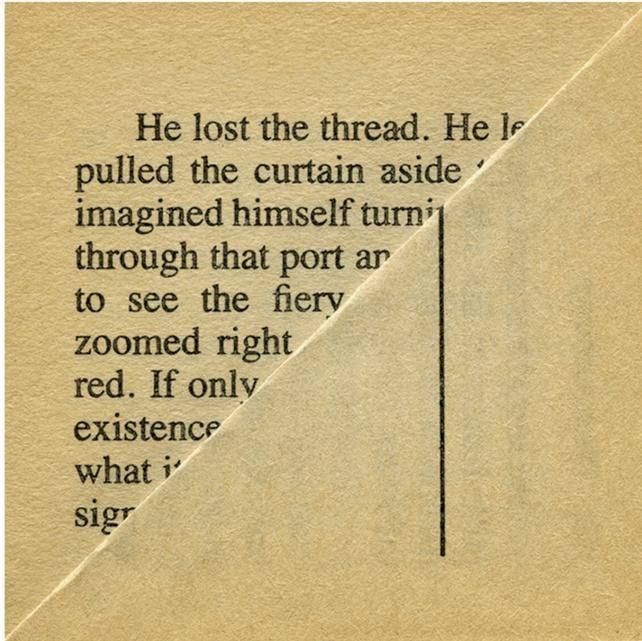
**RP**

(*laughter*) Were you making art at that time?

**EB**

I painted canvases on the floor in my bedroom. And I did collage. I majored in anthropology in college, but I thought of anthropology as something that could feed my art.

## Crèvecœur



*Thread*, 2020, (Dog Ear), archival pigment print, 9 x 9 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Bureau, New York.

**RP**

In your Dog Ear series, you find books and then dog-ear the pages and photograph the corners where the words meet at a right angle to each other. Does the selection of pages happen before you photograph them, or later in the process?

**EB**

I began with the books on my shelves, some of which I've had since my childhood. After I exhausted the supply of books at home I began scouring used bookstores and thrift shops. (It's always fun to have an excuse to go browsing in a bookstore.) I go through a book from back to front, folding corners and checking out the juxtapositions. I make many folds, scan them, and then review them later—after I've gotten to a point where I'm not thinking about what book they came from. With old, cheaply-made mass market paperbacks, the pages don't match up very well. That can be interesting, but sometimes it gets in the way of the reading, which for me is primary. I'm sensitive to material qualities, such as the acid aging, the density, and the type of paper, but if the words don't come together then I reject it. There are a lot of rejections.

**RP**

I get a sense of poetry when I read the words, but I also love to look at the *Dog Ears* series as just visual objects. The negative space around the words and the material qualities, as you put it, become as interesting as the words themselves. The words are visual elements. I'm looking at them for their meaning, as well as for their materiality and textures. Do you look for particular meanings, or just an overall sense that it *works*?

**EB**

I always have a vague sense of what I'm looking for, but then I'm continually surprised by what I actually find. That process of exploration and discovery spurs me on. When I first published *Dog Ear*, Ugly Duckling Presse invited me to do readings, and initially I was like, What? Doing the reading publicly made me realize that the reading is the way it works. I'm not sure if I was as conscious of that before.

**RP**

To me, the work feels like writing *and* like visual art. It's not either/or. It makes the distinction between writing and art irrelevant. You've figured out a way to be a writer who harnesses all of the non-written things that make books interesting as objects—the texture of the pages, the randomness of what you find in a book. It's a beautiful trick that you have pulled off. Sometimes I feel like I can smell those *Dog Ear* pictures. And that delights me as a writer.

**EB**

Thank you. I am absolutely aspiring to wear the different hats at the same time. I just finished reading an old copy of James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*. It was a used paperback so it had somebody else's underlining. I read it outside on the fire escape and the light would come through the pages, and the whole materiality of it gave me such a full experience of what I'm trying to convey in the *Dog Ears* series.

When my mother passed away, we had to dismantle the apartment, and I kept a lot of the old paperbacks I had growing up. They have a lot of meaning to me, not just their content but also their physicality. I want to be immersed in that and share that appreciation.

**RP**

There's a sense in which your work takes the wind out of the seriousness of writing. The authors of the books you use had intended their work to be read in the conventional way and have a certain kind of authority, but you're subverting that authority.

**EB**

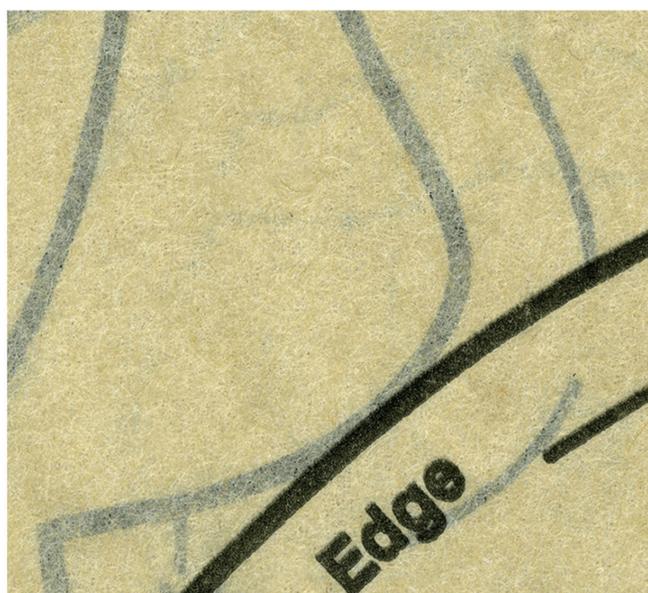
(laughter) It's a little bit subversive, but it's playful. It's still an homage to the love of reading. It's adjacent to appreciating the books as they were intended.

**RP**

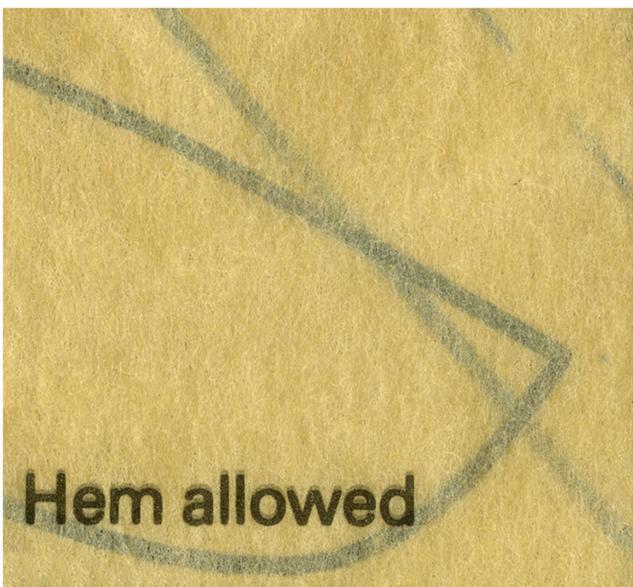
Your work finds new areas of pleasure or meaning that were not anticipated by the writer. It's an excavation, as well as an act of literary creation.

**EB**

Exactly.



*Edge 33*, 2019, (Patterns), archival pigment print 16 x 17.5 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Bureau, New York.



*Hem allowed*, 2018, (Patterns), archival pigment print, 16 x 17 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Bureau, New York.

RP

Are there writers who have been influential for you? I know that there's an explicit Gertrude Stein connection to the *Patterns* series. Your show at Bureau, *A Long Dress*, was titled after a poem in Stein's *Tender Buttons*.

EB

Well, I love Emily Dickinson. Her poems are short, and they're so dense. You're taken on a trip, a mental and emotional trip, within a very economical space. And that's totally exciting. But I love fiction too. I love Anthony Trollope, and I also love Beckett.

RP

At one point you taught English as a second language. It occurred to me that your work looks at English almost as if it were a second language, rendering it strange.

EB

When I taught ESL, I looked at words from a distance, as if they were objects, playing with that.

RP

Your work documents systems that classify and transmit knowledge, like library card catalogs or blackboards or books or, most recently, sewing patterns. You show both the loftiness of these endeavors, as well their pathos and humor. And you draw attention to how all these organizing systems are products of history themselves, doomed to become obsolete and archived.

EB

I try to reveal the subjectivity in the most seemingly objective systems. Even if they have institutional authority or structure with a capital letter, they're still just made by people.

Photography is inherently documentarian on some level. When I started working with card catalogs I thought, This is something we do; it's a quotidian practice. I'm showing you the hands behind the scenes and the wear and tear of the objects they produced. Within just a couple of years of starting that project, things started to go online and they started to decommission the card catalogs. I had to embrace the documentary aspect of that work as an additional element.

Now that I'm further along with the *Patterns* series, I've realized that more recent sewing patterns tend to be printed on shiny cardstock or they're just a downloadable PDF. But I need a *tooth* of some sort, something to capture visually. For example, the *Player Piano* series wasn't a nostalgic

engagement but more of an exploration of a twentieth-century artifact. I was really surprised that the ones I'd found at a yard sale had lyrics alongside the perforations, apparently so people could stand around the player piano and sing along. I'm always looking for found language in a material field, and the piano rolls were an unexpected and striking find. I chose to produce that series in a sparse black and white, minus the aging yellow paper, with the shapes of the perforations and the rubber-stamped lyrics in a white expanse to emphasize the dissonance between the syrupy pop lyrics and the industrially produced mechanical sheet music.



*Trance*, 2018, (Naked Eye), archival pigment print, 15.25 x 18 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Bureau, New York.

RP

A lot of your work seems rooted in the era of your childhood. Is there an element of autobiography in your work?

EB

I would call it a personal archeology. They're not necessarily the actual artifacts of my youth, but the objects I work with generate a feeling that resonates for me. Growing up, I had a little black-and-white TV set. Sometimes I'd turn it on to a movie that was already in progress. I wouldn't know what I was watching, but I would watch it anyway. Now we have access to everything—anything you're curious about you Google and you find it in a second. Back then we lived with more mystery. That's how *The Naked Eye* images work: they suggest narratives while simultaneously withholding them, and that tension keeps you engaged. That's how I related to those old movies. I was just awash in imagery.

RP

*The Naked Eye* series peers inside old paperbacks and reveals bits of imagery or text that appear sliced up by the edges of the pages—in a kinetic way that's suggestive of film. The title, *The Naked Eye*, is a reference to UFO sightings. So you've drawn a connection between the experience of being lost in a narrative or film that you don't have a context for, and the experience of encountering an "unidentified flying object," and trying to make sense of it.

You made that series into a book. *Sightings* couples your photographs from *The Naked Eye* and elsewhere, with slightly modified excerpts from firsthand accounts of UFO sightings. There's a poignancy to that project related to your earlier work with the card catalogs and so forth, one that captures the unintended poetry and humor of our need to describe and label. The descriptions of UFOs are often so lovely and detailed and earnest, but as a reader I'm also thinking of how wrong or misguided they may be.

## Crèvecoeur

**EB**

*Sightings* is from a onestar press series where they invite an artist to make a book following their template: a color cover with a black-and-white interior. Beyond that, the artist can do anything they want. *Sightings* is ostensibly about UFOs but it's also a commentary on subjectivity and disasters. When I was making that work, I thought about how newsstands in England put sandwich boards on the street with the day's headlines in very large letters. That shrillness fit with the shrillness of the UFO paperbacks I was finding. Like, I'm shouting the news to everyone! The other thing on my mind was the invasion from Mars that Orson Welles broadcast, where people actually believed the radio drama was real and panic ensued. As a subtext metacommentary, climate change was on my mind. I was hinting at things like floods and—

**RP**

—disasters.

**EB**

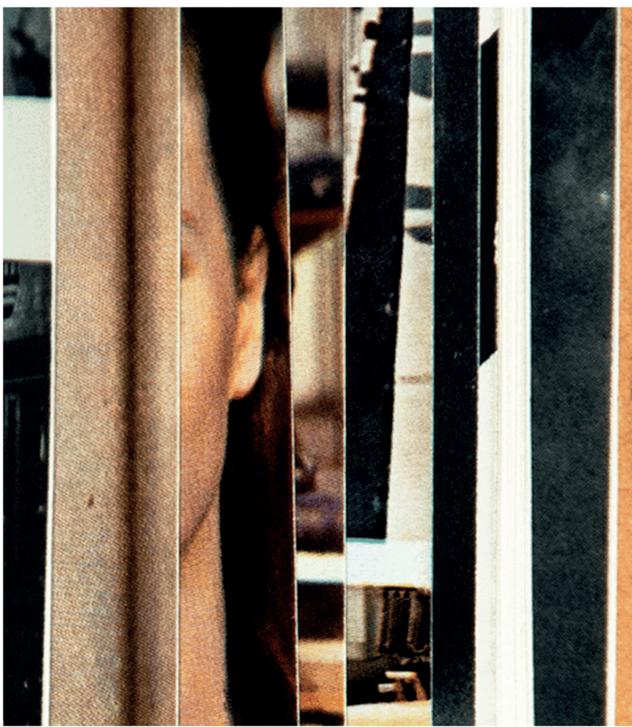
Exactly. That's partly why I chose to use the newspaper clipping process for the commission with Idra Novey. It reminded me of that mood.

**RP**

The newspaper clipping photographs look like they've been cut and collaged. Is that how they're made?

**EB**

Yeah. I take strips of text from the newspaper, and then layer them with other strips of text and color and printing errors mined from the same newspaper. But it's important to me that a viewer understands *The Naked Eye* series is *not* a collage. Those works are photographs of opened books, constrained only by their pages and the width of the opening. Often they are mass market books with vibrantly colored edges that contrast with the mostly black-and-white stills inside. What's exciting to me is how this completely unmanipulated result represents such a transformation. Similar to the *Dog Ear* series, I'm respecting the constraint of the page sequence; it's a kind of collage, but only in the sense that it's a found collage. Whereas the newspaper clippings are a deliberate collage. I love collage, but it matters to me that you know when it is and when it isn't.



*Preempt*, 2019, (*Naked Eye*), archival pigment print, 16 x 14 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Bureau, New York.

**RP**

The *Dog Ears* seem almost sculptural. That little bend in the paper feels palpable and three-dimensional and almost monumental in the way the fold dramatically cuts across the landscape of the page. It plays with perception and sense of scale. You've collapsed the distinction between the object and the photograph.

**EB**

The effect is similar to what you were saying about the visual and the literary. It's a *trompe l'oeil* in that it alludes to the object, but it's not the object. It bounces back and forth.

**RP**

Are you still working on the sewing pattern series?

**EB**

I am, but over the years, I've started working on more than one project at a time. I've realized I don't have to put aside what I've been doing and move on. It can be more interesting for me if I rest on a project for a little while and come back to it later. So I would say that I'm working on dog-ears, newspaper clippings, and sewing patterns. *The Naked Eye* is an ongoing project.

**RP**

How long will you work on these investigations?

**EB**

Many of them are theoretically infinite. One of my most finite projects, on the other hand, was the *Frick* series, which was black-and-white photographs of paintings in the catalog at the Frick Art Reference Library. That was in 1998, when art historians still used those catalogs for research. At the time, it was a commentary on art and poetry, but now it's also a commentary on how research has changed, and on our new relationship to the availability of imagery.

**RP**

You have an eye for the almost obsolescent. You pick something at the moment when it's on that edge of becoming historical.

**EB**

My formative years were the twentieth century and I have to just accept that. I'm really not doing it intentionally, however I also don't want to see these things go. I never know what I'm going to find, but I'm always worried I won't find another subject.

**RP**

So that's a real anxiety? That question of what's next?

**EB**

Yeah.

**RP**

That's interesting because patience is so evident in your work. You say you're not looking for things that are about to become obsolete, but you still seem to have an archivist's sensibility. You're systematic. And it's a deep investigation. As a viewer, I don't read that anxiety or impatience.

**EB**

It's not anxiety that I *have* to find something else, it's that I can't anticipate what the next project will be. My studio is in my house, and being home so much more because of the pandemic, I've been *trying* to get rid of things, and trying to say, I've used this book in every possible way and no longer need it. But sometimes I just move a book from one category, one pile, to another in terms of what I think I can do with it.

**RP**

That's really the beauty of your work. You find so much material in just one page of a book. It's Borgesian. You can explore each item almost infinitely.

Your most recent show at Bureau, the sewing pattern series, seemed to introduce an element of social critique about gender. I don't know if it's new, maybe it's just more pronounced.

## Crèvecœur

**EB**

It's gendered in that we tend to assume that the home dressmakers are women concerned with the dictates of fashion. That's an assumption I mean to turn on its head. The disembodied instructions don't allow us to follow through and complete a piece of clothing. Instead the selected words in the photographs redirect our attention to a more playful place. You have freedom from those stipulations, what length the hem should be this year and so forth.

**RP**

Right.



*Splinter*, 2020, (Newspaper Clippings), archival pigment print, 15 x 18.75 inches. Originally commissioned by Forma Arts and Media, London, as part of *too soon to tell*, 2020. Courtesy of the artist and Bureau, New York.

**EB**

I'm thrilled that two of my sewing pattern works, *Hem Allowed* and *Fold Coat*, are included in the Whitney Museum's "Making Knowing: Craft in Art: 1950–2019." The show had to close temporarily, but hopefully it can reopen soon. It was supposed to be on view into 2021.

**RP**

It's a great show. One of the show's premises, I think, is to collapse the distinction between craft and art.

**EB**

They brought together artists who work with materials and in ways that are traditionally associated with craft. But the show emphasizes the idea that these materials and ways of working are available to all artists and that there's freedom in rejecting those boundaries. I was just reading about the quilt maker Rosie Lee Tompkins in the paper today. I love her work.

**RP**

Me too! Your work has many connections to quilting, in the sense that you're using found objects. Quilting also uses found text, especially Tompkins' works. You seem to be interested in sections and squares of things, and in sewing. So I can understand the response you felt.

**EB**

For *Patterns*, I let the lines loosen up and break free from their horizontal and vertical bonds. When you're working with a spread-out pattern, it's quite large and you can end up circling around it—your place in relation to it is always changing. With no fixed point of view, the words can appear at angles. So the subject and the approach kind of meld together.

**RP**

The *Patterns* series also uses language that is directive and bluntly descriptive, like "edge" or "skirt" or "chemise." It's different from *Dog Ears*, where the original authors were creating certain effects with the words. Here the voice aspires to a neutrality but your work exposes and subverts that effort.

**EB**

Yeah. "Hem allowed" was this understood thing. Like, Are hems shorter or longer this year? You realize that even in a quotidian context, language can still be so heavily laden when we think it isn't. I'm always interested in the ways that bits of incidental language can prompt revelations that get at larger structural and cultural questions—that's the anthropology.

Rajesh Parameswaran is the author of *I Am an Executioner: Love Stories* (Knopf, 2012). His work has appeared in the Best American Magazine Writing, Fiction, Granta, McSweeney's, and Zoetrope: All-Story, and he has taught in the creative writing program at New York University.