

ARTFORUM

Erica Baum

BUREAU

Via close-ups of found language on partially erased chalkboards, View-Master discs, and newspaper clippings, Erica Baum has established herself as an insightful and nimble poet-photographer. Lists in particular yield an unexpected beauty under her gaze. Take *Untitled [Suburban Homes]*, 1997, a picture of an old-fashioned library card catalogue that cleverly isolates a pair of consecutive tabs marked SUBURBAN HOMES and SUBVERSIVE ACTIVITIES; or *How Long*, 2011, which features bits of dialogue along the diagonal fold of a dog-eared page. Even when Baum spotlights an image rather than a text (her series “Naked Eye,” 2008–, for example, consists of paperbacks that have been opened just enough to reveal part of an illustration), it is always framed by the printed word. For her recent exhibition at Bureau, the artist chose a new but fitting material: tissue-thin sheets of sewing diagrams and their accompanying manuals.

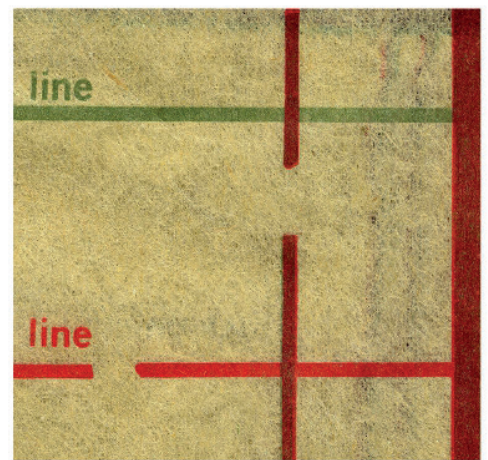
Though Baum put all seventeen of her digital prints under the laconic series title “Patterns” (all works 2018), two distinct projects were on view. The first was a tight grouping of colorful and darkly humorous pictures—one of them, *Turn Head Right Side Out*, focused on STEP 4 from a set of instructions on how to make a toy rabbit with frighteningly long teeth. (A sweeter stuffed animal appeared in *Bunny*, although the thread dangling from its newly stitched arm, like a length of filament hanging off a freshly sutured wound, was disconcerting.) In this lineup of works, the central image is flanked by strips of other pages, the careful arrangements highlighting the elegance of a lowercase Helvetica n, for instance, or the misregistration of halftone dots. Scanned rather than photographed, the layers are so strikingly flat that the stacked pages appear as stripes trapped within a singular plane.

The second body of work featured superimposed images instead of layered ones, the technique clearly having opened up exhilarating new avenues for Baum. Using sewing templates—full of differently shaped lines and symbols to guide a seamstress as she cuts a pattern to size—Baum teased out the generative connections between word and form with a dexterity and sharpness that far surpassed the other suite. Captured in high resolution so that the paper’s fibers are visible, works including *Place* and *Line Line Green Red* detail every crease and pucker in the overlapping sheets, evoking a remarkable sense of texture. In *Underarm Dessous*, black lines of varying thickness cross one another in a sensuous arc next to a wrinkle that bisects the page. Baum handles the material limitations of the patterns with a commanding fluidity, sparking a tactile evocation of the distinct weights between those of the

crinkly tracing paper and the textiles—such as cotton, wool, or silk—that might sit beneath it.

The exhibition’s title, “A Long Dress,” pointed to Gertrude Stein as a muse while highlighting the affinities between the dotted lines of the artist’s surfaces and Stein’s stuttering language. A quote from the writer’s collection of poems *Tender Buttons* (1914) seems to have inspired both *La ligne brisée* (The Broken Line) and *Cintura* (Waist)—after all, the phrase “a long line and a necessary waist” is Stein’s. But Baum is not merely illustrating the writer. As the artist drolly asserts with *Eye*, a blowup of the word that indicates the placement for a hook-and-eye clasp, Baum is concerned, above all, with what we do and do not see. Stein writes in *Tender Buttons*’ “Objects” section, “It is so rudimentary to be analysed and see a fine substance strangely, it is so earnest to have a green point not to red but to point again.” Baum’s abstractions insist that earnestness and the rudimentary remain virtues.

—Rachel Churner



Erica Baum, *Line Line Green Red*, 2018, inkjet print, 16 × 16%. From the series “Patterns,” 2018–.