

Exhibition Review by Barry Schwabsky (p293/294)

Sometimes the most apparently straightforward view turns out to be the most oblique. Such was the case with '2 Willow Road', Veronica Bailey's previous show, in which she presented a series of photographs of books from the library of modernist architect Ernö Goldfinger that showed only the unopened volumes edges. Projecting an absolute blankness, Bailey's crisp and detailed images, which lent the books an uncanny presence, conjured an occult form of reading, a sort of fingertip divination.

Of course this reading, like any other, requires a title as its starting point and Bailey provided the books titles (and authors) in her own. She communicated the sensation of somehow being able to see more deeply into Amedeé Ozenfant's *Memoires* (1968) or Anita Loo's *A Girl like I* (1966) than might have been possible by perusing them in the ordinary way and of seeing, as well, into the mind of their owner - a man who, perhaps, imagined Ian Fleming's Goldfinger (1959) as his alternative biography.

Continuing this oracular reading of the exterior of the text's support, Bailey's new series 'Postscript' (2004-2005), takes as its raw material the correspondence of Lee Miller, a figure of special significance for photography thanks to her work on both sides of the lens. Again, the texts themselves are concealed - we see only the edges of envelopes and folded sheets - though the photographs titles appear to be quotations from them: 'Goodnight Sweetheart', 'All my Love', 'Mad with Envy', 'Bombs Bursting' (all works 2005). Absent their texts, the physical presence of the letters - the paper's texture and quantity, the way it has been creased or folded - begins to imply some hidden meaning at which the title can only hint. Occasionally this hint is strengthened to the point of over - explicitness by the form of the image, as in 'Awakening Kiss', in which the envelope, slightly bowed open, approximates the shape of a pair of lips. But what these photographs teach at their best is that even something as loaded with intention as a letter is also imbued with unconscious meaning, an aura that only dissipates when one tries to represent it. Part of this meaning is the poignancy of its own elusiveness. Once they've been handled, read, and made part of a library, books share this quality, but as handwritten rather than printed texts, letters embody such an aura more powerfully.

The other images shown here are something else entirely: a mutation of Man Ray's 'Mr. and Mrs. Woodman' (1947-70), his sequence of pornographic poses acted out by a couple of wooden lay figures, the jointed humanoid models used by painters to work out poses. In Bailey's version, there is just one figurine, the female. Very tightly framed, the intricately posed little model becomes monumental, even as the rectangular form of the photograph seems to press in, squeezing her into outlandish postures. Through close framing and attention to surface, Bailey presents the figure's brown, grainy contours with immense sensuality, again evoking a tactile engagement with surface. The photographs' titles appropriate the first names of women who (like Miller) were associated with the Surrealist movement: Valentine, Nush, Meret. Bailey may be editorializing here in a way that her other work mostly avoids, but the neutrality - contentlessness - of the lay figure allows this. And Bailey is generous rather than scolding: These mannequins may have been manipulated, but, like her books and letters, they also attain a genuine sense of autonomy.