

Torn Space by Sue Steward (p52-55)

These obsessive photos detail a sensual world of books and love letters

In a relatively short period of time, British still life photographer Veronica Bailey has created a recognisable identity with a style that reflects her background in design, an enthusiasm for collage, illustration, typography, layout and book-binding, and a love affair with the tactility of paper. Books and letters form the principle content of her work: large, high-definition, Durst Lambda prints that now command high prices on the art photography market.

Born in London in 1965, Bailey studied graphic design at Middlesex Polytechnic and took an MA in Communication Design at Central Saint Martins, where she graduated in 2003. Her MA project explored a hobby, an obsession with collecting concert, tube and bus tickets. Their information and memories were preserved in a huge book featuring the tickets repeatedly photocopied, and a flicker book film that focused on the tickets edges, a pointer to her future style which also revealed the heavy influence of Kurt Schwitters. Bailey says the work marked closure for a career between BA and MA as a successful collage illustrator for magazines, advertising, design and publishing: she was on the Association of Illustrators (AOI) website until quite recently.

Bailey's reputation is founded on two collections of work. Her exhibition '2 Willow Road' (2003) won the Jerwood Photography Prize; two years later her show 'Postscript' was a commercial success at London's Blue Gallery and Miami Aqua Art Fair with Los Angeles's Bank Gallery.

A brief job as assistant to Tim Brightmore, the still-life advertising photographer, taught Bailey a professional approach to work; the clinical crispness of her photographs owes something to advertising techniques. Although she didn't work as a designer, with her husband, graphic designer James Traffon, she produced a brochure for the 'Postscript' exhibition which is meticulously printed in the style of the works: art works in themselves. Describing its production, she says: 'We created titles which are all based on methodological typographical information design. They're formatted. The other layer to my work is our partnership'.

She sees little connection between her work and advertising saying: 'Advertising can be very literal, everything has to be explained. I'm interested in people and in giving a clue; something you could learn about in your own life'.

Bailey's style began to focus during the years before her MA. In 1996 she worked as a volunteer guide at 2 Willow Road, Hampstead, the family home of Modernist architect, Ernö Goldfinger. The building is owned by The National Trust. There, she explored Goldfinger's life through his library: 'Through the books, reading where he and his wife Ursula read, was like taking a path through their lives; my work is always about relationships'. She explored the craftsmanship of the books, taking off the covers - undressing them to see the colours - and making a narrative through the titles. She photographed the books side on, with their page edges in the foreground of the picture, reducing their page edges to sharp, blade-thin lines, a characteristic of her work. Vertical patterns fill the frames, their abstract geometry changing as the books were slightly opened or closed. She also made much of the subtlety of the paper.

Goldfinger's books were chosen partly for their titles, and partly for the beauty of their paper, cover boards and illustrations. The titles of the photographs are the titles of the books, and are presented with full publishing details. Ernö Goldfinger, Major Mata, 1973 is an architectural construct with appropriately sharp angles, and dark mysterious spaces created between the pages. The Arrogance of Power, Senator J. William Fulbright, 1966 subverts the title with a bookmark lying suggestively between pale pages. The peachy pages of A Look at my life, Eileen Agar, 1988 are delicately feminine, but with a strong, tall beauty; Woman in Art, Dr Helen Rosenau, 1944 is a dramatic study, shot against a black background and drawing on the red inside pages and dark triangles between pages. Others exploit fragments of typopography and illustration, often recalling the book photographs of Abelardo Morell, whose work Bailey discovered in PLUK magazine while working on the Willow Road project and then studiously ignored. 'Morell works in black and white. I'm interested in colour', she says.

A clue discovered while working in the house at 2 Willow Road led to the follow-up collection, 'Postscript'. The link was in Goldfinger's friendship with Roland Penrose, the British Surrealist artist; American photographer Lee Miller, Penrose's second wife, and Man Ray, Miller's former lover and mentor. 'Postscript' was partly inspired by Penrose's collaged portrait of Miller, The Real Woman, which hangs at Willow Road, and Lee Miller's A portrait of space (1937), which Bailey describes as being 'photographed through torn muslin netting, a mirror held above the torn space'.

Bailey followed a trail from Willow Road to Farley Farm in Sussex, where Penrose and Miller lived after World War II, and trawled through the archives of her letters. Her subjects now are letters and telegrams written by Miller while she was a war photographer for US Vogue and sent to Audrey Withers, her editor, and Penrose, then her lover. They are photographed inside the original

envelopes, some precisely slit open, others with impatiently torn edges. Some gape, others are slightly ajar, holding secrets close inside.

The original abstractions created from Goldfinger's library displayed Bailey's precision, but here their cool, crispness has given way here to some romantic and undeniably erotic qualities. Nevertheless they possess the same graphic beauty, sophisticated design and dramatic use of dark spaces. 'Whereas the Goldfinger work took three to four months', she says, 'these were all shot in one day, just twelve or thirteen shots. And most were used. The challenge was to abstract the letters, and set them in a background. I was concerned that the subtlety of the colours would come out, and the printing was hard to get right'.

Entering the 'Postscript' exhibition was like walking through an aquarium of exquisitely sculpted plankton hanging in sea water. The show continued Bailey's exploration of photography to disguise and confuse literary meaning, but it possessed a tonal quality that is darker than Willow Road. The effect can be both exceptionally crisp and sensually soft, and sometimes almost sexual.

Shot close to, and edgewise on (with invisible means of support), the letters are isolated and suspended against a plane of inky, greenish space through the use of Photoshop. The dimensions are large - up to 1.7m wide. 'I could have gone even bigger', she says, 'But I limited myself to what would go in people's homes'.

The titles for 'Postscript' were linked to both subject matter and the shapes of the letters. 'Bombs bursting', which had accompanied photographic captions to Vogue, resembles a paper dart. The letters take on an unfamiliar abstraction decided partly by the textures of letter paper and envelope, and also isolated phrases from the letters for titles and sculptural shapes: 'Missing you', in a raggedly torn airmail-blue envelope, evokes the impatience with which Penrose opened it; 'I Love you' remains closed around secret words; the fish-shaped 'Goodnight sweetheart (1938)' is invitingly erotic; 'Awakening kiss', a suggestively open mouth, evokes Man Ray's photographs and a painting of Miller's lips, 'A l'heure de l'observatoire, les amoureux, 1932-1934'.

A pair of telegrams, 'Go Germanywards' and 'Going Pariswards', slightly folded and arranged like two halves of a kiss, is photographed under harsh lighting that converts the sharp paper edges into golden knife slashes. The x-shape reflects the way the letters are stored in the archives: 'I only realised after shooting them that by flicking one round, they make a kiss shape'.