

# Crude Metaphors

## Postscript



Images by Veronica Bailey  
Text by Joelle Jensen & Miriam Kienle

*If I had it all over again I'd be even more free with my ideas – with my body and my affection. Above all I'd try to find some way of breaking down, through the silence which imposes itself on me in matters of sentiment – I'd have let you, Roland, know how much and how passionately and how tenderly I love you.*

— Lee Miller, 9 September 1947<sup>1</sup>

Lee Miller wrote these words to the British Surrealist, Roland Penrose, while awaiting the birth of their first and only child, Antony Penrose. This year, 2007, marks the 60th anniversary of Antony's birth, the 70th anniversary of Miller's first encounter with Penrose, the 100th of her birth and 30th of her death. One of the twentieth century's most compelling photographers, Miller led a life that was daring, ground breaking, highly public, and yet intensely private "in matters of sentiment". According to the biographies written by Miller's son, a series of traumatic events regarding love, sex, absence and loss mark her formative years. He speculates that these events taught the artist to compartmentalize and consequently close off emotionally even as she pursued a publicly bold path. Miller's rape at age seven; the loss of two early lovers to tragic deaths; the negotiation of an unconventional relationship with a father who photographed her nude as a young woman; and a tumultuous love affair with the artist Man Ray, have been written about extensively in relation to Miller's work. Unfortunately, as a number of historians have noted, the more explicit details of her life and her physical beauty (Miller modeled for artists and commercially for *Vogue*) have often confounded a more in-depth analysis of her accomplishments as an artist.

A recent series of photographs by Veronica Bailey, entitled *Postscript*, however is an exception to this model. Reframing Miller's biographical information with references to her photography, Bailey opens up a new and productive dialogue between Miller's work and her own. In this body of work, Bailey intimates aspects of Miller's life through the depiction of her correspondence with Penrose and her editor at *Vogue*, Audrey Withers.

Although Bailey permits the viewer glimpses of the handwritten texts, she more often accentuates the tactile edges of the torn envelopes themselves, which conceal the words within. Bailey's titles suggest the letters' contents and disclose details such as date, place, to and from, and yet they reveal more about Miller's desire for privacy than they do biographical detail.

The correspondence selected by Bailey correlates to a brief period, pivotal both in Miller's personal history and the history of the world. The first letter in Bailey's series dates to 1937, the year the world teetered on the brink of global war and Miller and Penrose began their romance. At the time Miller was still living in Egypt, married to Egyptian aristocrat Aziz Eloui Bey and venturing out on desert excursions to photograph the landscape. In her best-known photograph from this period, *Portrait of Space*, the barren horizon is visible through the torn mesh of a screen door. It is at once a portrait of the arid desert and of the space from which Miller peers out. The shape of the torn screen compellingly evokes that of a single eye, mimicking the one behind the camera. *Portrait of Space* also engages the Surrealist fascination with violence (the tear) and the significance of the illusive eye as fetish object, symbol of power, gateway to the soul, and origin of sight.

Bailey's photographs evoke Miller's *Portrait of Space* as we look through the torn edges of an object that simultaneously reveal and obstruct our view; yet while Miller directs the view outward onto the landscape, Bailey guides us inward, cultivating an intimacy between the correspondents and the viewer. Formally, Bailey also reprises the orientation of Miller's eye in a series of portraits by Picasso, who in 1937 used Miller as a model for five paintings, frequently turning one eye on its side. Furthering the art historical connection, Bailey utilizes a lighting technique similar to the one applied by Miller in *Floating Head* (1933). The technique creates the illusion that the object (the head for Miller and the letter for Bailey) floats, serene yet anchorless, above an enveloping darkness.

The titles of the early letters portrayed in

*Postscript* declare a ripening love affair between Penrose and Miller: *Mad with Envy*, *Missing You*, and *All My Love*. The later letters however, dating from 1944 and 1945, correspond to the years Miller documented the tragic aftermath of the war for *Vogue* and feature more ambivalent titles. *Awakening Kiss*, for example would seem to be a love letter, but Bailey reveals it to be a letter sent to Withers at *Vogue*. Posted from Paris where Miller was relieved to find Picasso and friends in good health, the ambiguous title could potentially relate to this reunion. Bailey also presents *Awakening Kiss* horizontally, thereby expanding the dimensionality of the letter. Even more literally than the others, this image visually recalls an open eye as well as a pair of parted lips, both sensual references. Bailey's title enhances this play just as Miller often used titles to aptly describe and playfully insinuate other meanings into the objects she photographed. For example, Miller's photograph *Remington Silent* (1940) puns on a "Remington Silent" typewriter, literally quieted for the last time as it was blown apart in London during the Blitz. The sardonic nature of Miller's titles intensified as she recorded the magnitude of the war's devastation, in particular when she departed France for Germany to witness the liberation of the camps.

In another letter to Withers from April 1945, Miller writes:

*Every community has its big concentration camps, some like this for torture and extermination. Well I won't write about it now, just read the daily press and believe every word of it. I would be very proud of Vogue if it would run a picture of some of the ghastliness—I would like Vogue to go on record as believing.<sup>2</sup>*

With Withers's assistance, Miller's unflinching photojournalism changed the face of war, as well as *Vogue*. She gave the world some of the most important and gruesome images of Dachau and Buchenwald, documenting the war's devastation perhaps to the point of obsession. Reportedly, Penrose's repeated efforts to contact Miller during this time went unanswered, attesting to her self-

declared difficulties with emotional intimacy. Near breakdown, she was eventually convinced to return home where she reunited with and later married Penrose.

The last letters portrayed in Bailey's series are from 1945. Titled, *Go Germanywards* and *Going Pariswards*, both images are bleak, dark in tone and without adornment. The folded pages lack envelopes and point simply in the direction their respective titles suggest, recalling a key on a map. Miller's aforementioned experiences and near nervous breakdown lie between these pages and points of departure. Even Bailey, to whom the letters were read by Miller's granddaughter Amy, cannot truly know that which passed between the correspondents in their time apart. Given the extensive biographical information of Miller's life that could provide additional readings, Bailey creates a parallel and less visible narrative—one that reveals both the desire to, and impossibility of, reconstructing a life that is now absent to us. In the effort to inhabit a middle ground between an icon's public and private life, here, we will let *Postscript* have the last word.

1. Antony Penrose, *The Home of the Surrealists* (London: Frances Lincoln Ltd, 2001.) p.125
2. Penrose, p.55

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'Don't make me wait too long'

From: Roland Penrose  
[on Townsend Channel ferry]

To: Madame Lee Miller Eloui,  
Windsor Palace Hotel, Alexandria

Postmarked: London. 7:45am October 7th 1937

**43/ Crude Metaphors**



'Bombs bursting'  
From: Lee Miller  
[at the seige of St. Molo]  
To: Miss Audrey Withers,  
Vogue Magazine, 1 New Bond Street, London  
Rolleiflex captions dated: August 1944



'All my love'  
From: Lee Miller  
[Villa Albeit, Sharia Sabri Pacha,  
Dakki, Giza, Cairo]  
To: Mr. Roland Penrose,  
21 Downshire Hill, Hampstead, London  
Postmarked: Cairo, 8:30pm March 8th 1939

**45/ Crude Metaphors**



'Arriving Southampton'

From: Lee Miller  
[Cable & Wireless office, Cairo]  
To: Mr. Roland Penrose,  
21 Downshire Hill, Hampstead, London  
Cablegram dated: Cairo, 11:59am May 15th 1939




'Missing you'


From: Roland Penrose  
[21 Downshire Hill, Hampstead, London]  
To: Madame Lee Miller Eloui, [Villa Albeit,  
Sharia Sabri Pacha, Dakki, Giza, Cairo]  
Postmarked: London, 7:30am January 10th 1939



47/ Crude Metaphors



'Go Germanywards'  
From: Lee Miller  
[Room 412, Hotel Scribe, Rue Scribe, Paris]  
To: Captain Roland Penrose,  
12 Theatre Street, Norwich  
Cablegram dated: March 16th 1945



'Going Parisward'  
From: Lee Miller  
[Room 412, Hotel Scribe, Rue Scribe, Paris]  
To: Captain Roland Penrose  
12 Theatre Street, Norwich  
Cablegram dated: June 22nd 1945