

## Profile by Nigel Warburton

What every biographer knows, but rarely communicates, is the strange relic-like power of the remnants of someone else's life. Personal letters are particularly evocative: their textures, dusty smell, watermarks, the scrawl of a handwritten note, the worn paper that tells you they have been read and re-read - all are rich with association.

With *Postscript* Veronica Bailey has developed and expanded a distinctive expressive language derived from a biographical archive. Her earlier series, *2 Willow Road*, focused on a selection of books from the library of the modernist architect Ernö Goldfinger and his wife Ursula Blackwell. This won Bailey a Jerwood Photography Award in 2003. Images of the closed pages of books, partly selected for their intriguing, seemingly relevant and often witty titles such as 'A Look at My Life', 'Woman in Art' and 'Sex and The Office', combined an abstract elegance and subtle use of colour with the conceptual conceit of an unreadable text.

The starting point for the new series, *Postscript* (2004-05), is the wartime correspondence between Lee Miller and her lover (later to be her second husband), the surrealist artist Roland Penrose, which Bailey captured digitally at the Lee Miller Archive at Farley Farm in East Sussex. As with *2 Willow Road*, much of the power of these images lies in what is not revealed.

Every letter in *Postscript* is sheathed in its original envelope, every telegram neatly folded and preserved. The greatly-magnified edges of torn paper, the rich colours and depicted textures contribute to the abstract and sculptural beauty of works that satisfy at both an aesthetic and conceptual level.

The contrast with another photographer of paper, Thomas Demand, brings out Bailey's objectives. Demand works by creating life-size paper models of rooms and spaces, such as an office, an airport X-ray scanner, or an archive, and then photographing them. His images are of paper simulacra that are crisp and unmarked, and the results are impersonal, sterile, anonymous and at several removes from reality. The power of his work lies in the uncanny sense of the familiar made strange by human absence. Once he has photographed them, he destroys the models. Bailey's subjects, in contrast, bear the traces of time and of human presence. The letters and books she photographs are carefully preserved; her sympathies are humane, witty and passionate. Demand's photographs involve acts of re-creation; Bailey's are linked with the past, with traces of other people's lives and memories. Their power lies in the evocation of feeling and in a sense of mystery - in this respect Bailey's sensibility is far closer to Rachel Whiteread's casts of negative space than it is to Demand's photographic records of tableaux morts.

A closer photographic analogy, perhaps, is with Hiroshi Sugimoto's *Conceptual Forms* (2004). Sugimoto's large-scale monochrome prints of nineteenth century German models of plaster cones and curvatures, revealed the sculptural beauty of these mathematical teaching aids that had found their way into the archives of Tokyo University. Like Sugimoto, Bailey is sensitive to the transformative effects of magnification, and to photography's capacity to reveal the sensuous qualities of material texture. Another, much earlier, parallel is with Karl Blossfeldt's close-up plant studies in *Art Forms in Nature* (1929): enlarged seed pods, buds, ferns and shoots photographed against neutral backgrounds that seem to take on personalities of their own. Like Blossfeldt's Bailey's organic forms are both alien and familiar.

*Postscript* should not be viewed as simply oblique biography: it is not an indirect way of illustrating Lee Miller's life. The specific historical origins of the letters are pretexts for more open invitations to interpretation: experiments with form, texture, colour and scale as well as with meaning. One image by Miller, however, in retrospect, has become resonant for Bailey: *Portrait of Space* 1937. Photographed from within a room, looking out over desert near Siwa through torn fabric, the combination of abstraction and texture in this image echoes Bailey's use of forms that draw the viewer further into the picture. The ragged edge of the material presages the torn paper of the envelopes.

Bailey's is not an art of closed or private meanings despite the depicted concealments. *Postscript*'s titles, such as 'Don't Make Me Wait Too Long', 'I Love You', 'Missing You' and 'Mad With Envy' connect directly with the emotional charge of the folded letters without revealing more intimate detail. They tease the viewer into forming their own relationship with what might be within the hidden communication, inviting interpretations that move beyond the manifest elements towards whatever is latent within.

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His books include *The Art Question* and *Ernö Goldfinger: the Life of an Architect*.