

VERONICA BAILEY



SHELF LIFE



IN 2006 COUTTS & CO, ONE OF THE OLDEST, MOST PRESTIGIOUS BANKING FIRMS IN LONDON, COMMISSIONED VERONICA BAILEY TO EXPLORE ITS REMARKABLE ARCHIVE, THE PHYSICAL RESIDUE OF THE BANK'S CONTINUOUS ACTIVITY IN THE FINANCIAL MARKETS SINCE ITS INCEPTION IN 1692, WITH THE PURPOSE OF INSPIRING A NEW BODY OF WORK WHICH BOTH "CREATES A COUTTS NARRATIVE, AS WELL AS VISUAL INTRIGUE". HER PREVIOUS WORK INCLUDES THE JERWOOD PHOTOGRAPHIC PRIZE-WINNING 2 WILLOW ROAD (2003), IN WHICH BAILEY OFFERED AN INTERPRETATION OF THE LIVES AND RELATIONSHIP OF MODERNIST ARCHITECT, ERNÖ GOLDFINGER, AND HIS WIFE, URSULA BLACKWELL, USING NOTHING MORE THAN A SELECTION OF BOOKS FROM THEIR LIBRARY.

POSTSCRIPT (2005) WAS A VISUALLY ARRESTING MEDITATION ON THE PASSIONATE YET VOLATILE WARTIME AFFAIR BETWEEN LEE MILLER AND ROLAND PENROSE, THE LEE MILLER ARCHIVE GRANTING BAILEY ACCESS TO THEIR CORRESPONDENCE FROM THAT PERIOD - A SIMPLE AND SPARE RESOURCE, USUALLY REGARDED AS THE RATHER ARID FIEFDOM OF THE PROFESSIONAL BIOGRAPHER RATHER THAN THE RAW MATERIALS FOR A FINE ARTIST.

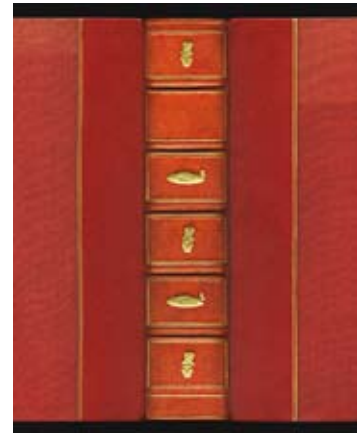
THE SERIES HOURS OF DEVOTION (2007), BAILEY'S INITIAL RESPONSE TO THE COUTTS COMMISSION, IS NOT DISSIMILAR IN ITS APPROACH. HOWEVER THE RESULTS ARE INEVITABLY NO LONGER ABOUT PERSONALITY, BUT RATHER ABOUT THE MORE GENERAL SWEEP OF HUMAN EXPERIENCE, IN PARTICULAR THAT OF LONDON AND ITS INHABITANTS IN THE MID TO LATE NINETEENTH CENTURY. ITS INSPIRATION WAS THE DISPLAY OF OVER A THOUSAND LARGELY LEATHER-BOUND BOOKS LOCKED IN GLASS CABINETS ON THE 4TH FLOOR OF THE COUTTS HEADQUARTERS AT 440 STRAND. SHELF LIFE (2008), ON THE OTHER HAND, IS A COMPLETELY SEPARATE, SELF-CONTAINED VISUAL ESSAY, WHICH, WHILE UTILIZING THE SAME RESOURCE, MANIFESTS A MARKEDLY DIFFERENT CONCEPTUAL APPROACH.

KNOWN AS THE OLD STAFF LIBRARY, THE COLLECTION WAS INITIATED IN THE 1850S BY ANGELA BURDETT-COUTTS (1814-1906). BY ANY MEASURE, SHE WAS, AS THE FUTURE EDWARD VII OBSERVED, "AFTER MY MOTHER, THE MOST REMARKABLE WOMAN IN ENGLAND". IN 1837, AGED JUST 23, SHE INHERITED HER GRANDFATHER, THOMAS COUTTS' FORTUNE IN THE BANK AND THEN DEVOTED MUCH OF THE REST OF HER LIFE TO PHILANTHROPIC CAUSES. ALTHOUGH HER INVOLVEMENT WITH THE BANK WAS STRICTLY NON-EXECUTIVE, SHE WAS UNDOUBTEDLY SEEN AS ITS FIGUREHEAD AND WAS KEENLY AWARE OF THE WELFARE OF ITS EMPLOYEES. TO THIS END, NOT ONLY DID SHE PAY CLOSE ATTENTION TO THE SALARY STRUCTURES AND WORKING HOURS, BUT INTRODUCED (AND PAID FOR) FREE LUNCHEES AND EVEN SET UP A LIBRARY AND READING ROOM ON SITE ESPECIALLY FOR THE STAFF.

LIKE MOST LIBRARIES, THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE OLD STAFF LIBRARY WAS EVIDENTLY A RATHER ORGANIC, EVEN HAPHAZARD PROCESS. ITS HOME SHIFTED UP AND DOWN THE STRAND DEPENDENT ON THE NATURAL VAGARIES OF COMPANY BUSINESS AND THE LONDON PROPERTY MARKET. WHEN



ANGELA BURDETT-COUTTS HAD STARTED THE LIBRARY IN THE 1850S, THE COMPANY HAD ALREADY OCCUPIED PREMISES AT 59 STRAND FOR SOME 120 YEARS. IN 1904, A LEASE WAS TAKEN OUT ON 440 STRAND AND, WITH A HIATUS BETWEEN 1973 AND 1978 FOR REFURBISHMENT, THE LIBRARY HAS BEEN THERE EVER SINCE. OVER THE LAST FEW DECADES IT HAS REMAINED LARGELY UNDISTURBED AND UNDER LOCK AND KEY, SADLY BUT PERHAPS INEVITABLY MORE IN A DECORATIVE CAPACITY THAN AS THE ORIGINALLY INTENDED RESOURCE OF KNOWLEDGE AND INSPIRATION FOR THE BANK'S STAFF.



THE LIBRARY CONSISTS LARGELY OF NINETEENTH CENTURY WORKS COVERING A PLETHORA OF SUBJECT MATTER AS BEFITTED THE NATURAL CURIOSITY OF AN AGE DEVOTED TO PROGRESS, MANY IN FINE TOOLED LEATHER BINDINGS WITH LUSCIOUS MARBLED OR GILDED PAGE EDGES. BAILEY'S HOURS OF DEVOTION SERIES PLACED THE EMPHASIS ON THE PAGES AND CONTENT THAT LIES BETWEEN THE TOOLED LEATHER COVERS OF THESE TOMES. BY CONTRAST, WITH SHELF LIFE HER FOCUS HAS NOW SHIFTED TO THE BINDINGS THEMSELVES – VERSO AND RECTO - CROPPING UNIFORMLY TO ENDOW PARTICULAR SIGNIFICANCE TO THEIR SPINES.

THE RESULTANT IMAGES ARE A TESTAMENT TO THE PROCESS AND WEAR OF TIME, LIGHT AND THE OCCASIONAL READER. THE SURFACES - MARBLED CARD, SPUN CLOTH OR SOFT ANIMAL SKIN - RETAIN THE BATTLE SCARS OF USE. FORMERLY ADJACENT LIBRARY BOOKS OF DIFFERENT HEIGHTS HAVE LEFT GHOSTLY LIGHT SHADOWS ON THE BINDINGS OF THEIR NEIGHBOURS. THE SPINES THEMSELVES, PROUDLY DISPLAYING THE GOLD EMBOSSED DECORATIONS TYPICAL OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY, HAVE BEEN SUBJECTED TO BAILEY'S EDITORIAL INSTINCT. AS IN THE POSTSCRIPT SERIES (2005), WHERE SHE TANTALISINGLY OBSCURED THE CONTENTS OF THE LOVE LETTERS BETWEEN PENROSE AND MILLER, THE TITLES HERE HAVE BEEN DIGITALLY EXCISED FROM THEIR CUSTOMARY POSITION. THIS DE-CONTEXTUALISING IMPARTS A STRONGER VISUAL IMPACT, PRESENTING THE VIEWER INSTEAD WITH SIMPLE SPARE FIELDS OF COLOUR. FOR TITLES, EACH IS BESTOWED ITS ORIGINAL LIBRARY INDEX NUMBER, THOUGH NOW PRE-FIXED WITH THE CLASSIFICATION CANTO. THE POETICAL IMPLICATIONS ARE OBVIOUS – FROM DANTE TO BYRON TO POUND – BUT IT ALSO SOMEHOW IMPOSES A RHYTHM UPON THE RICH TONALITIES OF COLOUR.

INDEED IN VISUAL TERMS, THE REFERENCE IS PERHAPS LESS POETICAL THAN MUSICAL; BAILEY IS PAYING FEALTY TO THOSE SUCH AS ROTHKO, AND ABOVE ALL BARNETT NEWMAN WITH HIS OWN SERIES OF 18 CANTOS FROM 1963-4. ALTHOUGH HERE UTILISING THE MEDIUM OF PHOTOGRAPHY AND TAKING AS HER SUBJECT THE LUSCIOUS SURFACES FASHIONED BY VICTORIAN BOOK- BINDERS, BAILEY'S CANTOS DO REFLECT 'A FORM, MOOD, COLOUR BEAT, SCALE AND KEY' SIMILAR TO THE LITHOGRAPHS THAT NEWMAN CREATED IN THAT SEMINAL SERIES. EACH IMAGE CAN STAND ALONE, BUT UNDOUBTEDLY THE 48 IN THE SERIES OFFER A MULTIPLICITY OF UNIQUE ARRANGEMENTS, CREATING ALMOST INFINITE RHYTHMS OF DIFFERENT CADENCES AND RESONANCE. LIKE NEWMAN, BAILEY ACCEPTS THAT ANY "ATTEMPT TO DESCRIBE SOMETHING WHICH IS ALIVE IS IMPOSSIBLE"; IN HIS ESSAYS EZRA POUND WROTE OF RHYTHM AS ' THE HARDEST QUALITY OF A MAN'S STYLE TO COUNTERFEIT'. SHELF LIFE, IN A SENSE, IS HER OFFERING TO HER AUDIENCE TO DO WITH WHAT THEY WILL, HER INVOCATION TO THE VIEWER TO COMPOSE HIS OR HER OWN VISUAL "BOOGIE WOOGIE".



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CANTO 1147



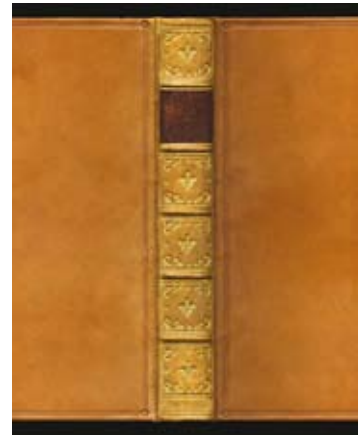
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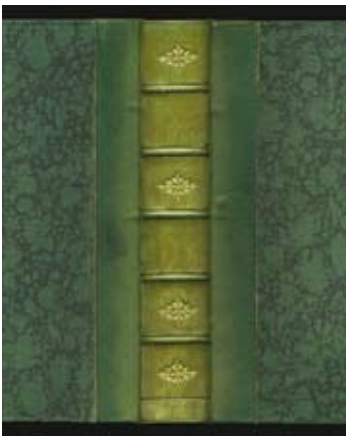
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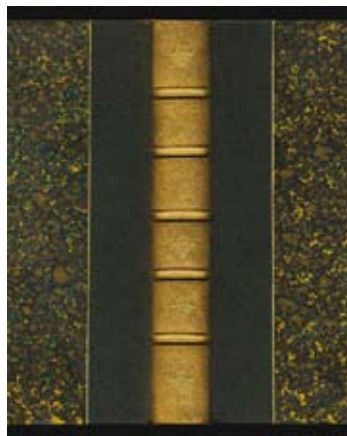
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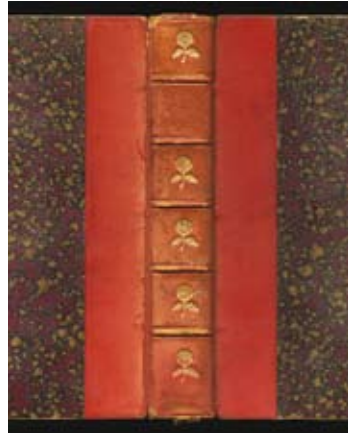
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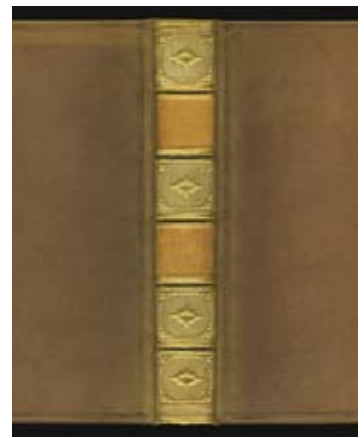
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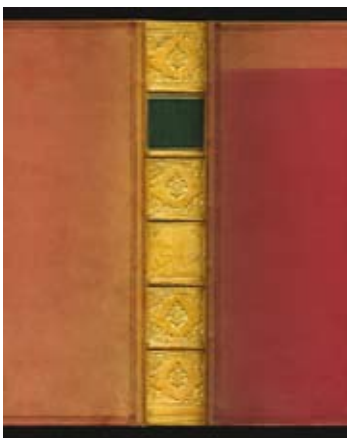
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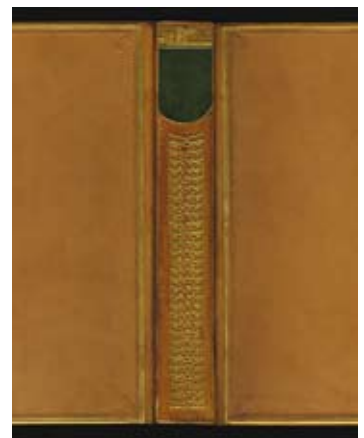
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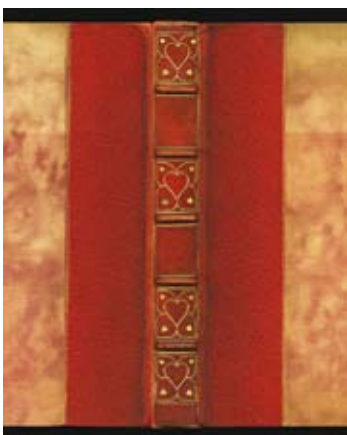
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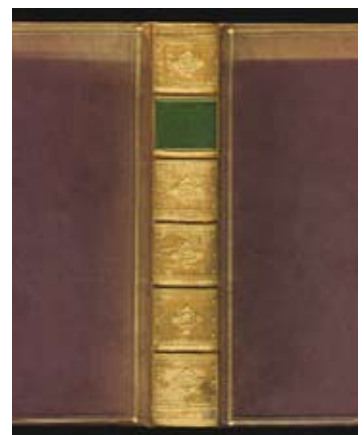
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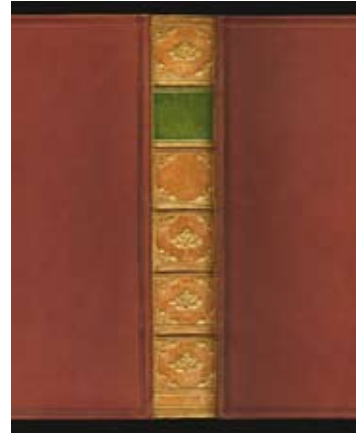
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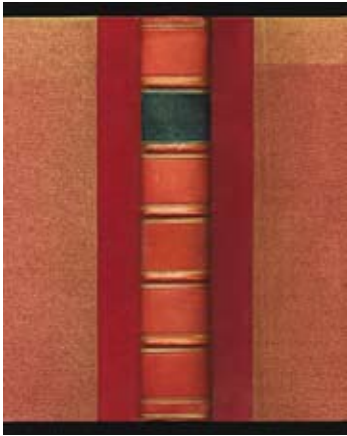
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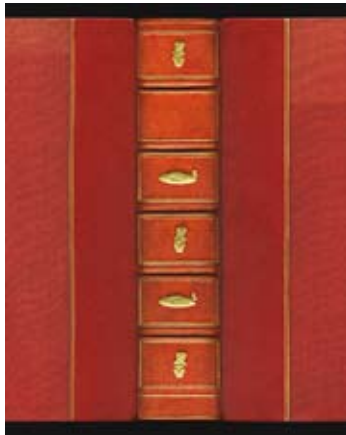
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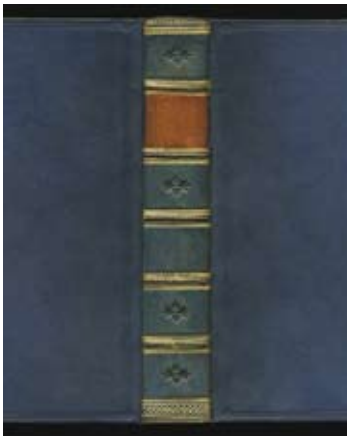
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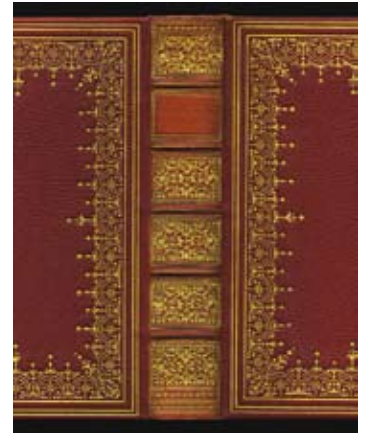
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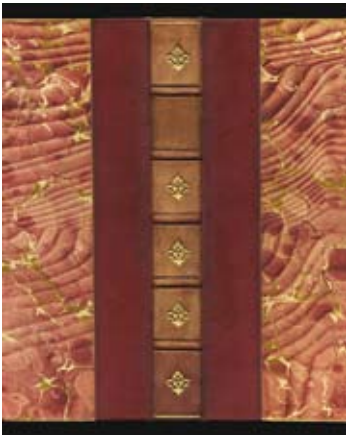
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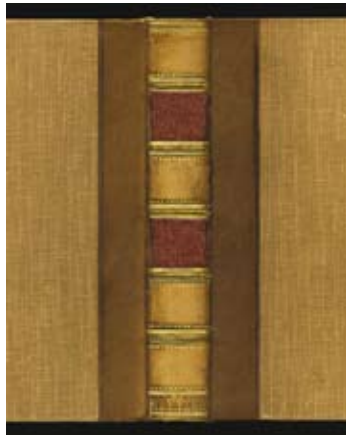
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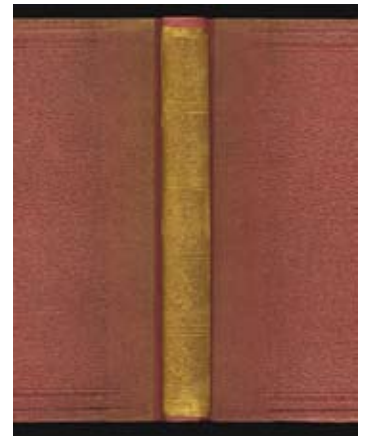
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VERONICA BAILEY

SHELF LIFE

COLNAGHI
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SHELF LIFE
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