

Artist Statement
Mary Ellen Bartley

STANDING OPEN

This is my fourth series of photographs looking at books. While shooting my stacks and rows of tightly closed paperback books I started seeing some of the standing books loosen up and show bits of the space between their pages. I was drawn into the uniquely beautiful interior space of the books. I began opening all kinds of books and placing them standing open around my space where sunlight might fall on them. This quickly became a project of looking into my photography books in a new way, falling into and out of the books, into and out of abstraction.

This work interests me on many levels. First is the sheer beauty of the physical books and the unique formal discoveries of looking at them close up. Among the repeating formal motifs I've found are the stripes the pages create, the shadowy voids between pages that read like burns or stains, and the reflections the photos can make on the pages facing them.

On another level I'm fascinated by conceptual ideas concerning appropriation and reproduction in a mechanical versus digital age that the work can't help but throw into question. What is the unique aura or presence of a book? Finally what drives the work for me is the emotional connection I have to the books. I'm trying to evoke the sensuality and intimacy of reading and looking through books as well as the fleeting inspiration, the little jolts of connection found for me in books that I love.

PAPERBACKS

In the paperbacks series I was interested in creating a circumscribed project where simple objects are arranged, studied and photographed in a particular light then slightly rearranged and restudied. I'm exploring the possibility of creating beautiful even emotionally moving images by photographing objects in a purely formal way, investigating their visual qualities and relationships without assigning them much meaning or significance.

The palette I discovered in the stacks, containing chalky Necco wafer pastels, fog grays and tooth colored whites, creates a calm meditative atmosphere. The quiet colors and the deliberate exclusion of clues to the books' contents serve to mute the narratives, information and ideas the books must contain.

Like Morandi's bottles the paperback books I employ create tonal poems. Little differences mean a lot in such an intimate scale. There is a world of variations, sequences and arrangements to explore.

Although I purposefully mute the books in my photographs and ignore their content – I am fascinated by the changing role of the book at this time. As information is stored in tinier and tinier digital forms the analog book seems to be moving into a realm of preciousness. I have an attachment to the lovely materiality of books, the imperfections of their papery geometry and the very human and comprehensible scale of the contents compressed and contained within them.

BLUE BOOKS

The sensation of night falling is both lovely and scary. In *Blue Books*, my third series using books as subject, I work in the palette and light of twilight when shapes are barely separate and the sense of space becomes unreliable, feeling very close and very deep and the same time.

As a child I had an obsessive habit where I would line things up with my eyes, titling and adjusting my head until the scene before me seemed straightened out and ordered. I also played with squinting my eyes and softening everything. It was a calming behavior that distracted me from my highly dramatic family.

It's a personal tic I've taken to my still life work where I can use the camera to capture the alignments and relationships of objects that I set up. I am again avoiding drama by purposely excluding hints to the books contents, muting the stories they contain. The colored planes of the books are seeped with damp blues some nearly black, like color field paintings that revel in the sensation of color. The texture of the book cloth reads like canvas stained with paint. I love the way color in a Reinhardt or Rothko painting seems to hover around the canvas. I play with camera focus to achieve that hovering effect and to evoke a sense of space up around your skin but fathomless like a lake at night.