

PROFILE

Bea Nettles: (Politely) Breaking the Rules

By Deborah Kogan

In June 2005, I participated in Bea Nettles' four-day workshop, "Sunprinting On Paper: From Antiquarian To Digital," at the Paper and Book Intensive in Steamboat Springs, Colorado. In this workshop, students explored three historic photographic processes—cyanotype, Van Dyke Brown, and gum bichromate printing—that have enjoyed a revival since the mid-1970's as "alternative photographic processes," thanks in part to Nettles' self-published instructional textbook, Breaking the Rules: A Photo Media Cookbook. As I learned about her career as a photographer and book artist and saw examples of her work, I became fascinated with the story of Nettles' evolution as a book artist.



Pictured at right is a card from *Mountain Dream Tarot* with Nettles as "Queen of Pentacles"

...

See more of Nettles' work at her website www.beanettles.com

Over the last 35 years, Bea Nettles has built a successful career as a fine art photographer and book artist by quietly breaking the rules and feeling her own way forward. In her 20-year retrospective catalogue and essay on her work, *The Skirted Garden*, which was self-published in 1990, Nettles says that from the beginning, "my work...[reflected] the themes of woman's strengths and ways of knowing about the world." However, rather than directly challenging the male-dominated status quo in the academic art and photography departments in which she studied and later worked, she proceeded with getting her work done "in a characteristically southern (polite) manner."

Initially, she received attention for the unusual alternative processes she used, which included fabric and paper works stitched on a sewing machine, hand colored photos, and small intimate books. To some extent her critics' reactions to her radical processes—"cutting and sewing photographs," Nettles says, "was seen as an outrage"—diverted them from paying more attention to her more quietly subversive content, which was personal and autobiographical and was concerned with the recurring themes of childhood, gardens, water, plants, the moon

and its phases as related to the female cycle, mythological women, mothers, loss, enclosed spaces, the imagery of the Tarot deck, and sources of emotional strength.

In addition to working with photographic imagery in alternative media during the early 1970's—in works that included stitched fabric and photo-linen pieces, vinyl quilts, and a piece with Kool-Aid-filled vinyl hearts—Nettles began producing both unique and limited edition books. Her earliest books were one-of-a-kind notebooks in three-ring binders filled with machine-stitched collages of photographs on paper and film. One ongoing theme in Nettles' work that first emerged in these notebooks was the portrayal of women in mythology, using self, friends, and relatives to portray key roles. Another emerging theme was the centrality of personal history using images from family snapshots, often infused with social commentary. In the images "Christmas Doll" and "Christmas Gun," in the notebook *Ghosts and Stitched Shadows*, Nettles commented on the marketing of gender stereotypes as she compared the doll she received for Christmas one year to the gun her brother received. These early photo-collage notebooks functioned as a visual journal or sketchbook in which Nettles worked every

night during her first year of teaching.

In the early 1970's, Nettles began making photographs using a cheap plastic camera. She printed small black-and-white images and organized them into sequences. In 1973 she began issuing self-published books of these photographic images in editions of about 100 copies each, using offset lithography. Book titles included *Events in the Water*, *Events in the Sky*, *Feasts and Feats*, *Florida Fantasy*, and *Escape*. These books were sold as "artists' books" by the New York photographic gallery that represented her work.

Nettles also produced early experimental books that combined text and images. In *The Imaginary Blowtorch* and *The Elsewhere Bird*, published in small editions of about 100 copies in 1973 and 1974, respectively, Nettles included poems written by her mother, Grace Noble Nettles, and her own photographically derived images. These two books included pages printed with colored ink in offset lithography interleaved with pages produced by screen-printing onto mylar and tracing paper.

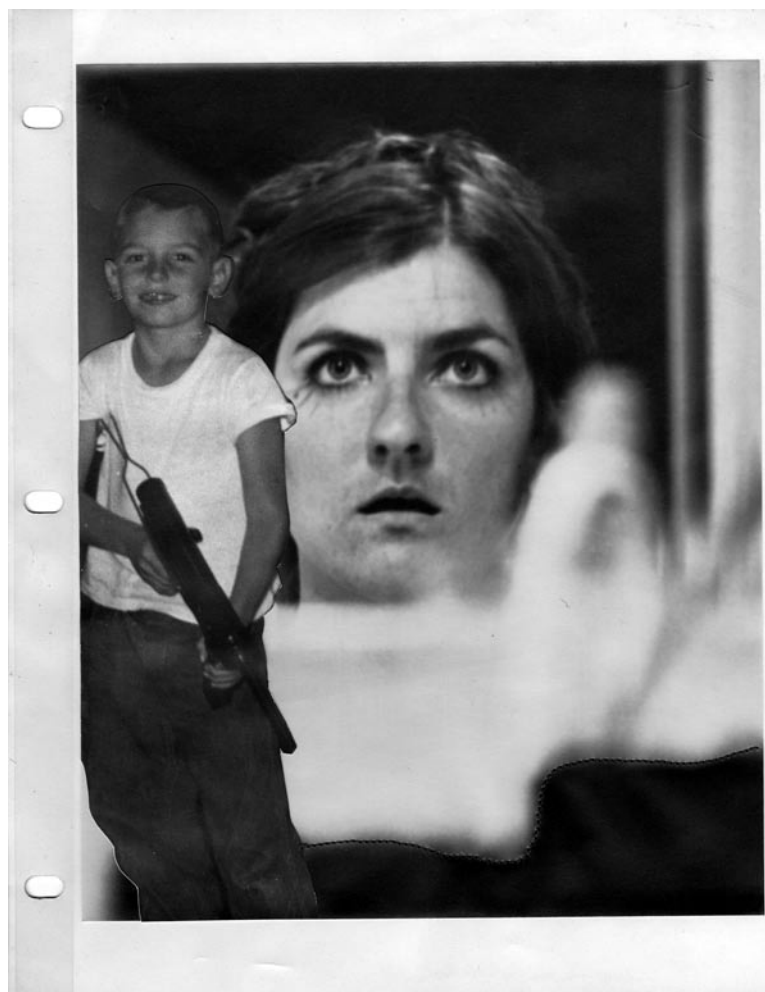
By the mid 1970's Nettles was making small press editions as one of her major forms of artistic production. She had discovered that by using the book form she could combine words and images, work in sequences, and reach different audiences from the audience for her exhibitions of photographic prints. Major works published in 1975 included *Dream Pages* (published in an edition of 100 copies), which included distorted and manipulated photographic images, and *Mountain Dream Tarot* (800 decks of 78 cards each)—a photographic deck of Tarot cards in which Nettles played several key roles, including the Queen of Pentacles, "the woman most associated with everyday work, the earth, and daily routine."

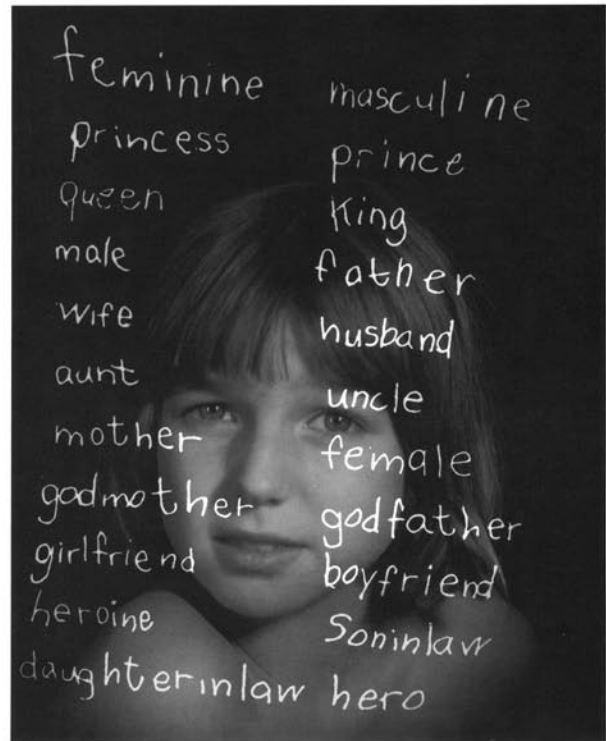
Fastforward to 1990. We have just leaped over fifteen years during which Nettles self-published two major books: *Breaking the Rules: A Photo Media Cookbook* (1977), a textbook on how to use several relatively "low-tech" historic photographic processes—cyanotype, Van Dyke Brown, and gum bichromate printing—and *Flamingo in the Dark* (1979), which presents a body of color

work she completed using Kwik Print—a commercial process related to gum bichromate printing that produces one-of-a-kind images. In contrast to her other photographic series, which mostly respond to what she sees "out there" in the world, the images in *Flamingo in the Dark* were made-up stories using photographic bits and pieces of recognizable people, places, and things.

During the fifteen-year period we have just jumped over, Nettles also became mother to two children, a boy and a girl. From that point on, she said, "my perspective changed forever"; she became filled with admiration for the heroic and miraculous generative power of women. Also during this period, she was hired to be the chair of the photography program at the University of Illinois. At the University of Illinois she became part of a community of artists and teachers in which women were much more in evidence than they had been in her previous teaching job at the Rochester Institute of Technology.

"Christmas Gun"





Playing with dolls is not what's fun, collecting them is. As soon as one doll is purchased, another 'with slight variations' appears on the market. Toys are sold with checklists, which work well to create an artificial need for more. Like many consumer goods, dolls have brand names. Children know that the less expensive ones are "cheap".

Two-page spread from *Life's Lessons*, including the image "Feminine/Masculine"

These changed perspectives are reflected in the content of *Life's Lessons: A Mother's Journal*, a self-published book from 1990. In developing the body of photographic images that led to this work, Nettles began making triptychs that clustered around certain themes (e.g., luck, money). Initially produced as photo-etchings, the images in this series were later photographed as large-format (20" x 24") black-and-white Polaroid prints. In the book, the text accompanying the images describes many of the issues faced by mothers in this culture, including how to deal with sibling rivalry, gender identification, struggles with discipline and limits, and fear of how strangers could harm one's children. Since 1990, Nettles has completed another eight or nine book projects, which she self-published under the imprint of Inky Press Productions, Urbana, Illinois. A number of the books she has completed over the last 15 years—including *Complexities* (1992), *Grace's Daughter* (1994), *Turning 50* (1995), and *Memory Loss* (1997)—are reflections on her personal and family history, preserving the details of that history for future generations and taking stock of what she has learned.

In a June 2005 interview conducted by Steve Miller, a co-director of the Paper and Book Intensive, Nettles reflected on the book works that she has completed since 1990. Nettles seems to be comfortable with the fact that she is most well known as an artist for her book projects. She says, "I still have shows [of individual photographs], but most people who know my work, know it through the books." Although she usually begins a new project by making individual photographic images, she waits for the work to announce its presence as a book. "A lot of times I don't realize that I'm doing the next [book] until it dawns on me that I've been doing it."

The experience of making *Turning 50* was like this, she says. "I was at Penland School of Crafts in North Carolina—to which I have returned many times over the last thirty years—photographing the trees and I started photographing my own body. The trees had gotten older; my body had gotten older." The images made during this trip to Penland, Nettles says, dealt with the present moment. However, in shaping the book,

she said, “I looked through already existing images, which included a lot of self-portraits I had been making over the past year. The book, as it took shape, also reflected my concerns about the future and the past.”

The project on which she is currently working—*Return Trips*—hasn’t yet presented itself to Nettles as a book. (See photo at right.) The project consists of black-and-white photographs, presented as “straight photography,” with hardly any cropping. Each image consists of one square photograph at the bottom, with three smaller images presented across the top. Although the images are presented together because of formal relationships among the photographs, several linked photographs were often taken at the same site (often Penland School in North Carolina) at different points in time, in keeping with the theme of return trips.

In addition to bringing new and older images together in new visual combinations in her recent work, Nettles has been learning more about hand bookbinding, by taking bookbinding workshops from Hedi Kyle and Barbara Mauriello. As a result of these workshops, she is now making more one-of-a-kind books.

Nettles seems to be resigned to the fact that it is difficult to earn money by making artists’ books. By publishing her own works, she has been able to maintain control of her work. She thinks that commercial publishers would never have let her tell her stories the way she wanted to tell them. “These sorts of themes don’t sell,” she says, matter-of-factly. She has obtained the funds for her limited edition books from the profits on her textbook, *Breaking the Rules: A Photo Media Cookbook*; from several grants, including two National Endowment for the Arts fellowships in photography; and from one commercial fashion shoot completed in Italy in 1990. “It takes a long time for the books to actually pay for themselves,” Nettles says, “so I would not encourage people to work this way if they expect to make large profits. Fortunately for me, I have a full-time teaching job and don’t need to rely on sales to support myself. This is liberating. I see these books as an important aspect of my creative



“Gondola,” from the series *Return Trips*

expression and a wonderful means to get my ideas disseminated.” ☞

Deborah Kogan is a photographer and book artist who lives in Santa Cruz County, CA.

All images reproduced in this article are by Bea Nettles, were provided by her for this use, and are protected by copyright.

Sources for this article

1. Bea Nettles, *The Skirted Garden: Twenty Years of Images*, Urbana, Illinois: Inky Press Productions, 1990.
2. Bea Nettles, “Online Works” and “Information about Recent Projects” at www.beanettles.com.
3. Podcast of a June 2005 interview with Nettles conducted by Steve Miller, available at www.bookarts.ua.edu/podcast/061105nettles.mp3.