Miki Baird

In a West Bottoms studio, occupying the category between people who scour junk mail for useful information and people who slam it in the recycling bin without looking, is the artist Miki Baird. Using the unsolicited ephemera as a primary medium in her paper weavings and collages, often constructing massive, multi-paneled work via a labor-intensive process, Baird references personal and cultural histories.

“The weaving, the tearing, the cutting all comes from my familial history. It goes way back many generations. As a child I was sent to my grandparent’s farm for rehabilitation before each school year. I spent a great deal of time cutting and tearing fabrics from old clothes. As far back as I can remember, I’ve been cutting up and dissecting things.” Bins of shredded paper fill her studio. Finger-sized scissors and specialized tweezers line the workbench. From all the dissecting and tearing comes an intensive period of reassembling, layering and doctoring images. Baird approaches texture in text and layers, layering panels until they resemble a topographical surface, reminiscent of old maps or gauzy sheets.

Although the medium is unusual, Baird has a personal connection to the junk mail, which arrives on schedule to her mother’s mailbox. The discarded envelopes, credit card and internet offers replace the miscellaneous fabrics of traditional quilts to create a tapestry of modern cast offs. It’s a continuation of her family history, but as an artist Baird has found her own interpretation of the traditional practice. Look close enough at the objects and key words start to reveal themselves, encapsulating the feel and mood of junk mail in the right fonts and vocabulary: Healthier (a medical hue of purple); LIFE (all caps); American (in bold, red letters). These words come from enclosed promises, guarantees of a better life through new cable providers, and equivocating consumerism with patriotism. When reassembled, those promises resurface--an errant narrative running through the body of work, threading stories into structures. The piece *without which* is one of the few Baird has chosen to display upright by leaning against a wall instead of using a more traditional display method.Baird controls the composition by rotating the same fractured photographs over and over, a series of patterns emerge in the grids, making the individual components in the whole image feel less random. From afar, the image resembles static on an old television, and in a white frame with the right lighting, *without which* appropriately glows.

In the case of *Tunnel Walker*, Baird creates her own patterns out of a photograph of a man walking towards the horizontal lines of illuminated stairs. It’s hard to contextualize this single frame, but by the time Baird has reproduced the image to create a dizzying pattern, the meaning of the single image becomes insignificant in the overall composition. “These were not permission photographs,” she admits, “but I take thousands of photos.” Candid photography is her way of conducting research on formal art principles, and Baird has developed an instinct for which moments have the most pattern potential. “I have always been intrigued by that figure. I will probably go back and do something with this image again.” All her materials, even when left behind, deserve a second consideration--much like the mail that piles up in the mailbox. Viewing the work, it becomes staggering to think all this material filters through a single residential mailbox, not just enough to create an impressive object out of the unwanted material, but a series that has come to define Baird as a patient and sensitive archivist.