

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

MARY ELLEN BARTLEY Reading Grey Gardens

September 8 – October 15, 2017



*This Bright Summer, (Reading Grey Gardens), 2017*  
archival pigment print, 17 x 20 ¾ in



*Red Cloth Cover (Reading Grey Gardens), 2017*  
archival pigment print, 20 ¾ x 17 in

Opening September 8 and on view through through October 15, The Drawing Room in East Hampton is pleased to present **MARY ELLEN BARTLEY Reading Grey Gardens**. A longtime resident of Wainscott and a passionate bibliophile, Bartley is known for her penetrating photographs inspired by the physical and formal properties of books. In recent years her work has concentrated on single owner book collections and institutional libraries. This exhibition of 42 photographs is the first presentation of a vivid series that honors the haunting fragility of the personal 20<sup>th</sup> century library belonging to the storied Beale family.

Earlier this year when Bartley learned about the imminent sale of East Hampton's legendary Grey Gardens, she approached the owner, Sally Quinn, for permission to document the Beale library within. Phelan Beale and Edith Bouvier had purchased the house in the 1920s, and after ten years Phelan abandoned his wife and children who stayed on in near poverty until Edith's death in 1977.

Edith and her daughter "Little" Edie were the subjects of the noted documentary, *Grey Gardens*. Directed by the Maysles brothers, the film captured the extreme eccentricity of the owners and their domestic environment. Bartley's immersive exploration of the books Quinn and her late husband Ben Bradlee salvaged from the dumpster when they bought the neglected house in 1977 adds dimension to the Maysles' earlier cinematic portrait.

Known for her mastery of natural light, Bartley approached this project with a documentary imperative, positioning each volume on a clinical grey background to focus her lens on the evidence of time and the salty humid air that blew through the house for decades. Many of the photographs highlight the charm of 20<sup>th</sup> century typography embossed on a spectrum of faded linen bindings. Others feature very personal doodles and figure drawings on interior pages that bring the family personalities alive. Under Bartley's intense scrutiny the tattered bindings of ochre, grape, aqua and magenta seem to fall apart before our eyes.

Dating from the 1890s to the 1960s, the elegant fonts of the titles on many of the volumes all but evaporated on the weather stained covers. *Why Men Like Us* is a demure volume, featuring a delicate gold medallion. *The Riding Club of East Hampton* is a handsome marbled album with a pinwheel logo recalling show ribbons. With its beach cabana blue and white stripe, *The Maidstone Club* cover promises rules of etiquette for the members. *Vitality* which seems to have lost its cover altogether, and *The Truth About Beauty* share the shelf with a 1920 edition of *Mutiny on the Bounty* whose graphic schooner sails across an azure linen binding. *The Wonderful Romance* must have been more appealing than the helpful hints offered by *Release from Nervous Tension*. And for the very curious there was *Information Please* or *Book of Knowledge*, before the internet. *Frankenstein*, with its blood red linen cover, looks well read. For vacation planning there was *Paris in 7 days* or *The Holiday Husband*.

Softened by the ocean spray, these books expose not only the pleasure reading of an elite class living in East Hampton for 50 years but also Bartley's keen eye on time, the true subject of her medium, photography.

Mary Ellen Bartley has exhibited in numerous institutions including The Queens Museum, The Walker Art Center, Houston Center for Photography; Parrish Art Museum, The Watermill Center, and National Museum of Archeology and Ethnology, Guatemala and Guild Hall Museum. The painter Ross Bleckner chose Bartley to exhibit her work alongside his at the Parrish Art Museum's *Artists Choose Artists* exhibition in 2011. Previous site-specific projects have included *Reading Robert Wilson*, followed by a "book of books" titled *Reading Robert Wilson*, which was shortlisted for the Fotobookfestival Kassel Dummy Award in 2015, and an installation at The Queens Museum working with Andrew Beccone's Reanimation Library in 2017.

[www.drawingroom-gallery.com](http://www.drawingroom-gallery.com)

Gallery Hours: Friday, Saturday & Sunday, 11-5 and by appointment

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