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Valérie Belin. Silent Visions

This flyer gathers english translations for all the texts displayed in the exhibition.

Valérie Belin. Silent Visions

Born in 1964 in Boulogne-Billancourt (France), Valérie Belin is a visual artist and photographer, a major protagonist on the French art scene. She graduated from the Bourges school of Fine Arts in 1987, then a year later earned a degree in Philosophy of Art from the University of Paris Panthéon-Sorbonne. Originally focusing on American Minimalist art, she then worked exclusively in photography. This medium became both the subject of her work and her creative device – from taking the actual shot through to post-production – adopting a serial approach.

Since 1993, she has produced some 50 series of large-format photographs, initially in black & white, then in colour from the mid-2000s. The digital era opened up a vast array of possibilities which she has explored ceaselessly, producing increasingly sophisticated works. She first focused only on objects, chosen mainly for their luminous qualities, then featured human figures for the first time in her 1999 *Bodybuilders* series. Portraits and human bodies with an archetypal dimension then became her favourite theme.

For 20 years, Valérie Belin has exhibited and won awards in France and abroad, including the HSBC Prize for Photography in 2000 and the Altadis Award in 2001. She stayed in New York that year on a Villa Médicis external residency. In 2002 she had her first personal exhibition in a contemporary art gallery in New York. Two years later, she won the Marcel Duchamp Prize.

She has had two major retrospectives in Paris: at the Maison Européenne de la Photographie in 2008, and the Centre Pompidou in 2015. That year, she also won the prestigious Prix Pictet on the theme “Disorder” with her Still Life series, displayed at the Paris Musée d’Art Moderne then in several cities worldwide. In 2022, she was made Commander of the Order of Arts and Letters and exhibited the following year at the MUba Eugène Leroy in Tourcoing, northern France. This year, she had the honour of being elected to the Académie des Beaux-Arts in the Photography section.

Since 2013, Valérie Belin has been represented by the Nathalie Obadia gallery (Paris, Brussels) and the Edwynn Houk gallery in New York. Her works are conserved in the greatest public collections in France and abroad: the Musée National d’Art Moderne/Centre Pompidou, the Paris Musée d’Art Moderne, the Fondation Cartier pour l’Art Contemporain, the Kunsthaus Zurich, the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York and the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Seoul.

“One might consider my work as an obsessive attempt to appropriate reality in which bodies, in the broadest sense of the term, play a decisive role.”

Organised in partnership with the Nathalie Obadia gallery (Paris, Brussels), this monographic exhibition is one of a series of invitations over the past dozen years by the Musée des Beaux-Arts to contemporary artists in France. The conversation between the museum collections and current creation is an important part of MusBA outreach which has always bridged past and present.

Originating from an encounter with Valérie Belin during her 2017 personal exhibition at the Institut Culturel Bernard Magrez, this project was a must for us. Long nurturing a passion for baroque and 19th-century artists, especially Manet, museums and works by past masters have influenced Valérie Belin’s art. Her photography’s plastic and especially pictorial value, and her constant references to art history and its iconic genres (portraits, nudes, still life and vanitas) prompted MusBA to grant her carte blanche in the temporary and permanent exhibition areas. The Beaux-Arts gallery features a rich selection of 116 photographs from key series by the artist from 1996 to 2023, including

five photographs from the *Lady Stardust* series displayed in public for the first time, in “retrospective” style. Valérie Belin has overturned the timeline to highlight formal interactions between the sets displayed. The circuit starts on the ground floor with recent series showcasing female faces and bodies. Upstairs, older series explore questions of identity and mimicry, and downstairs, humans are definitively ousted by objects. The circuit takes visitors from one wing of the museum to the other.

Eleven photographs, taken between 1996 and 2022, strike up a conversation with the painting collections, from Nordic Baroque to the 20th century, toying with formal correspondences that offer visitors an alternative view of the museum works.

“My use of colour is neither naturalist nor realistic. It is tantamount to applying makeup.”

With *Silent Visions*, Valérie Belin depicts beauty in images that are both arresting and troubling, sometimes even tragic. From black & white to colour, silver to digital, the artist has always cultivated a taste for oxymorons, blurring the boundaries between nature and artifice, reality and virtuality, humans and objects, the sublime and the morbid, the living and the inanimate. She accumulates stereotypes, conveyed by the diktats of fashion and consumer society, all the better to deconstruct and underscore vanity, even vacuity. Her work is saturated with visual signs, resonating markedly with the museum’s works.

Groundfloor

Female archetypes : between true and false

Valérie Belin has always been interested in photography as a medium, and portraiture is clearly her favourite theme. Often focusing solely on her mainly female models’ faces, here they have been reduced to mere archetypes. Expunged of any subjectivity or narrative intention, Valérie Belin’s portraits are more mental visions than conventional psychological studies. The artist explores beauty, associated with femininity in the collective imagination, all the better to shake up traditional canon and defy convention.

The recurrent mannequin motif is undoubtedly the greatest example of ambivalence in her work. She started exploring this “Marvellous Modern” emblem, cherished by the Surrealists, in the early 2000s, and repeated it in many series (*Crowned Heads*, 2009; *Black Eyed Susan I*, 2010; *Super Models*, 2015; *All Star*, 2016; *China Girls*, 2018; *Modern Royals*, 2020; and *Lady Stardust*, 2023). In this world treading a fine line between fakery and reality, the celluloid mannequins in shop windows seem more emotional than the disembodied live models staring into the distance. The artist then switched to colour and digital, to compose portraits of imaginary beings that simultaneously look both real and unreal.

She drew on the worlds of comics, magazines and film for backdrops to representations of super-heroines lifted directly from video games. Contrasting the joyful dynamic of comics with her models’ sad, frozen faces, Valérie Belin explores toxicity in a psychic world that’s saturated, chaotic and obsessional. She favours overprinting processes, combining various images (shopfront signs for sex shops and fast-food outlets in the 2012 series, *Bob and Brides*, a muddle of random objects, colourful arabesques from graphic software etc.), the artist creates jubilatory visual cacophonies in which the human figure is literally absorbed into and merged with its decor. This contamination between human and object reaches a paroxysm in the series *Black-Eyed Susan I*, in which the model heeds the conventions of rigid beauty according to Hollywood glamour, yet blends into the softer world of flowers.

The world of illusion and show business already featured in the earlier series on dancers from the nightclub Lido (2007) with a plastic smile (the mannequins do not smile at all). Valérie Belin’s use of colour as if in a makeup session similarly points to a penchant for artifice and a distancing from reality, as seen in the women with clownlike faces from the recent series *Heroes* (2022) and *Painted Ladies* (2017). This series is undoubtedly the one that best captures the picturality of her photographic work, with its very title and the brushstroke across the cheekbones.

“I think portraiture is somehow a “forever genre” maintaining the same level of importance throughout visual art history.”

1st floor

Yearning to be someone else

Since the late 1990s, Valérie Belin has constantly explored identity and gender issues. Her message is neither sociological nor political; it is more an empathetic approach towards her subject. Her *Bodybuilders* (1999), *Transsexuals* (2001), Michael Jackson lookalikes and *Mannequins* (2003) all seek to attain an ideal they have chosen for themselves.

This wish to become someone else, setting one's own self aside, is what Valérie Belin is interested in here. Her models undergo physical transformation, relinquishing their status as a subject to become an object or image. Perceived as sculptures, the *Bodybuilders* with their athletic bodies recall canons of beauty in ancient times. The subject is further alienated by the sensation that the expressionless face is divorced from the hypertrophic, tensed-up body. The use of black & white confers an abstract, sculptural dimension to these images, as in the *Black Women* series (2001). The same radical spirit infuses the *Moroccan Brides* series (2000), depicting women imprisoned in heavy bridal gowns which erase their bodily presence. By contrast, another series, *Dresses* (1996) does suggest the presence of a living body within: crafted with Calais lace, the dresses spread like shrouds. Tapping into the same notion, the *Engines* (2002) series shows engines palpitating like living organs.

“The alienating nature of stereotyping is highlighted here: the yearning to be someone else.”

Black Women I depicts sculptural beauty, and *Black Women II* (2008) shows women of various ethnic origins all with the same impeccably straightened hairstyle. Then in *Transsexuals*, *Mannequins* and *Models II* (2006) the artist presents the actual faces as if in “genetic mutation”. The use of all-black or all-white backdrops and hieratic poses accentuates the virtual, ectoplasmic effect of the figures. The anonymity of untitled works in some series further dehumanise the characters.

With the lookalikes of disco king Michael Jackson, Valérie Belin taps into both pop culture and mimicry, which theme she had addressed two years previously with *Transsexuals*. The *Chips* and *Masks* series, both produced in 2004, buck the trend of reassuring banality in daily life with a dramatic use of black & white, and tight framing. Photographed in boutiques in Murano, the Venetian mirrors (*Venice I and II*, 1997) also surpass their simple status as decorations for sale, to attain a more symbolic dimension, that of narcissistic illusion.

R-1

Objects of Desire

Whether associated with human beings or substituting the subject itself, objects are a core feature in Valérie Belin's art.

Before introducing human figures in her 1999 *Bodybuilders* series, the artist only took photographs of objects presented as evocations of bodies suffused with light (Glass, Silver and Mirrors). In series of either black & white or colour, these items reappeared in her work around 2010. Still life as a genre was an early subject in photography; Valérie Belin used it less as vanitas, more a cabinet of contemporary curiosities. Here the artist is toying with references borrowed from pictorial conventions of Memento Mori and commercial photography to create an unhinged world. Already a feature in *Fruit Baskets* (2007) with its saturated colours, this decorative exuberance inspired by baroque also recurs in *Still Life* (2014). The artist decided to keep the title of this series in English only, for its reference to life, given the joyful mayhem of the decor teeming with trinkets, a tangle of swimming caps, mannequin heads, plastic toys and artificial flowers.

The same overflow of objects inhabits *Interiors* (2012) depicting collectors' apartments reminiscent of Eugène Atget's Parisian Interiors from the early 20th century. The profusion of furniture, pictures and books yet again procures a sensation of suffocation, accentuated by the crooked perspective achieved using the wide angle. Contrasting with the tangy tints of the *Fruit Baskets* and *Still Life*, the artist deployed deadly black & white in her *Bouquets* (2008) of flowers. The artist's genius lies in her ability to foster "the uncanny" in the Freudian sense of the term, amid apparent normality.

The one constant motif throughout Valérie Belin's work appears to be shop windows. In turn dreamlike and obscene, displays are used in many series showcasing female mannequins. A source of fascination for the photographer, shop windows are a paradoxical surface showing what's inside as well as reflecting the urban landscape. Commissioned by the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, the Reflection series (2019) is a complex layering of several images, creating a loss of bearings. Valérie Belin references street photography in the US and the vernacular tradition in photographic history, yet shrugs off any documentary intention, to create a mental landscape.

“I take photographs of living beings and things with a kind of equivalence which has the effect of rendering my living models lifeless and breathing a little more soul into objects and items.”

The Valérie Belin exhibition continues !

There are more *Silent Visions* to discover in the two wings of the museum, in a circuit that matches artworks from the permanent collections.

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