

Quentin Bajac, *Plastic Photography*.

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### *Plastic Photography*

The work of Valérie Belin is rooted in the object and in the practice of the still life. They form the springboard from which, since the late 1980s, she has been setting in place a method which she has pretty well kept up ever since. In 1987, while still a student, she photographed neon lights; printed as negatives, “the images look like an X-ray of a body part.” A radical, seminal act, for here we immediately find the germ of some of the main directions taken since then: the object–human relationship, the refusal of the emotional (frontality, distancing of the subject), the metamorphosis accomplished by the act of photographing, the reversal of values (black and white, positive and negative), lastly a reference to American art—here minimalist, that of Donald Judd, later on Pop Art (the “Masks”, ill. 8; the “Potato crisp packets”, ill. 9) or hyperrealist (the dummies). To that extent we can say straightaway that all of Valérie Belin’s photographs are still lifes, even though, as we shall see, the term seems slightly inappropriate when applied to her practice. The human gradually asserted itself during the 1990s, indirectly to begin with, by its absence (bridal gowns/shrouds, smashed cars), then by its presence—it is hard to say its reality. This first act was firmly anchored in the idea of photography, in the most basic, literal meaning of the word. The photographed object and the means used were as one in a pure inscription of light, even though that light was ambiguous, like black light—a blinding light. Since then, tirelessly and as it were against the current, Valérie Belin has pursued an enterprise deeply rooted in a single practice—photography, to date her one and only form of expression. At a time of increasing hybridization of media and a steady growth in the resources used by her generation of artists, this unobtrusively taken stance however is by no means one of isolation, since her photographic work contains an abundance of references from outside of photography, sculptural and pictorial for the most part, from Zurbarán to Richard Avedon, with a marked preference for American sixties art, the main elements of which were Pop Art and Minimalism, from Tony Smith to Roy Lichtenstein, along with a constant attention to the world and to contemporary art.

What, then, of Manet? The choice for this “Correspondance” was no foregone conclusion.

Certainly, Manet’s attachment to Spanish painting defines a definite filiation, particularly noticeable in his full length portraits of the 1850s and 1860s. In this regard, we might more readily have compared Valérie Belin’s work with certain explicitly bald paintings, like *Le Fifre*, for instance,

which in its isolation, its sober composition and the indefinable Midway status of its subject (between child and man), immediately seemed closer to the artist's concerns. But the correspondence with Manet goes beyond the mere play of formal analogies and iconographical parallels. As the artist explains,<sup>1</sup> her interest in Manet's art lies partly in his attitude towards reality—his sustained attention to this silent presence of things, with no idealism or excessive prosaism, and which we find in an even more rawly explicit way in Manet's still lifes.

This close scrutiny of objects and beings is central to Valérie Belin's work and partly accounts for her unflinching attachment to photographic recording. It is a device seen as a special tool for capturing not reality, a complex and terribly unstable notion, but, more modestly or lucidly, the outer casing of a world reduced to subjects; i.e. the adherence of light to matter and a surface, sometimes animate, sometimes inanimate. This attitude in fact refers back very directly to certain aspects of Richard Avedon's approach. In this regard, the marked reference to Avedon, noticeable to any outside observer superficially in the ostentatious neutralization of the background (also present in Irving Penn at the time and derived from the aesthetics of the studio and fashion photo) must also be understood at a much deeper level. In 1980, the latter explained: "My photographs do not get behind the surface of things. They do not get behind anything. They are just surface readings."<sup>2</sup> No doubt this is something Valérie Belin would have concurred with and of which she made a discriminating reinterpretation, at least in the early days. In an article he wrote a few years ago on the work of Valérie Belin,<sup>3</sup> Javier San Martín rightly noted the oxymoric nature of some of her subjects; this so unusual way in which she seemed to seek in her work to reconcile certain concepts and attitudes that tradition readily sees as being antagonistic, falling between minimalism and the baroque. To take this a step further, it does not seem usurped to place this tension at the very heart of the artist's work and to see the actual *device* she has been using stubbornly and methodically since the late 1980s as being a major source of contradictory tensions.

These burst forth from Valérie Belin's earliest series and come about from the meeting of the neutral photographic device and some highly expressive subjects. The former immediately asserts itself in a twofold refusal, of a certain verism on the one hand, of any narrative content on the other. The invariable recourse to the photography room, arranged front-on before the subject, captured today in its totality (for the objects) or half-length (for the humans), designates a well-established tradition of the documentary photograph —from Walker Evans to August Sander, from photomaton to anthropometric photographs. Attempts at great depth of field, notably obtained by adopting sophisticated, often dramatic lighting, paradoxically tends to destroy the realism of the relief, with each detail being placed on the same plane and the whole representation gaining extra flatness, this being further emphasized by adopting what might be termed a neutral background:

monochrome, without depth, white or black, it became Valérie Belin's trademark from the outset. A space which in its flatness is more comparable to the modern pictorial space of the canvas than the stage setting of the photographer's studio. One way ultimately of indicating that this has nothing to do with theatricality: it is not a scene, it is a photograph, which tips Valérie Belin's work once and for all on the side of Avedon and not Penn, whose neutral background generally has depth and depicts a degree of theatricality.

In response to this device is the powerful choice of subjects with a "high expressive charge,"<sup>4</sup> to quote Valérie Belin's own words. Of course, once it has been identified, with the notable exception of the bodybuilders (ill. 10 and 23) this charge will be placed at a distance, in the portraits, by deliberate neutrality in the pose and the expression. Valérie Belin nonetheless clearly claims this singularity or "photogenic quality"<sup>5</sup> for her models and objects. Her subjects are often kitsch, linked to the vernacular culture, deeply bound up with the contemporary consumer society.

If we were to draw up a rapid inventory of Valérie Belin's iconographic registers, we would observe that the objects are often remarkable industrial artefacts, mass consumer items (computers, ill. 11), sometimes linked to Pop imagery (motors, packets of crisps, smashed-up cars, ill. 9, 12, 21, and 22), or animated by a spectral human presence (bridal gowns, shop-window dummies, ill. 28). Depending on the exegetes quoting Barthes, the thing appears "protruding,"<sup>6</sup> while the lighting tends to bring out the matter and surfaces, the "skin of things."<sup>7</sup> Most of the time printed in large sizes, they acquire a monumental presence, almost human in some cases, larger than life witnesses. More like totems than objects. Facing the powerful presence of these totemic objects, the humans populating the territory surveyed by Valérie Belin are often typed, or even stereotyped, and singularly spectral, as if already unreal and reified by the photographic device.

So it would be wrong in Valérie Belin's case to speak truly of portraits and still lifes. The codified genres of painting in past centuries seem inappropriate to describe this specific approach. This is because Valérie Belin draws no distinction between the human and the inhuman, between the animate and the inanimate, between man and the object. The same approach, the same device tend invariably to give an account of both the one and the other. We do not have on the one hand things and on the other beings, but a continuum of presences and phenomena, caught by the photograph. The upshot would be to reify humans and deprive them of any reality (bodybuilder/scar/ black women-statuettes), and, conversely, to restore a presence to things. Here we have another parallel with Manet. We recall what Georges Bataille had to say: "Manet had placed the image of man on a level with that of the rose or the brioche: the still lifes of the *Luncheon in the studio* are no less raised to the level of characters as the characters brought down to the level of things."<sup>8</sup> In this, and despite a similar initial postulate, Valérie Belin's pictures are by no means

portraits, with all the psychological connotations the word carries with it.<sup>9</sup> Also, on Avedon, she adds: “The expressive side of his subjects is foreign to me.”<sup>10</sup> She is much more interested in implementing typological and formal variations based on a common model. In each of her series the individual’s singularity is impaired by the obedience to common cultural stereotypes to which everyone tries to conform, up to and including the assumed artificiality and the waiving of what makes us human —like the being becoming a thing.

As for the still lifes, the term itself is incorrect, as we again see for ourselves with these baskets of fruit; their imposing presence, the sculptural character of their composition distance us from them. One critic noted early on: her first mirrors looked like rayograms, reduced to just the bare outlines. It is because, like human beings, the objects captured by Valérie Belin also escape their status as things to reach other identities, those of sculptures (the baskets), of beings (the motors referring back to carcasses) or images (the mirrors, ill. 13; the decorative profusion of the lace dresses or Moroccan bridal gowns). In comparison with these earlier works, the great formal novelty in Belin’s work is the use of colour—this colour that first appeared in her work three years ago now. Valérie Belin has already explained her ambiguous relationship to colour. Her initial mistrust had nothing to do with aesthetic bias and much more with her wanting to have full control over the finished image, something she could only get with black and white. Digital tools, she says, completely reshuffled this initial deal, giving her greater possibilities for intervening, changing and hence controlling her chromatic values. It is in these “fruit baskets” that she plays for the first time with so much baroque freedom; the exuberant colours, the visual cacophony they bring to it, reinforce the artificiality of the content and even blur the identity of the image as a photograph. The fabric of the fruit, its surfaces and materials, even the imprint of light from these objects, are all relegated to the background in favour of patches of bright colour, the actant of the passing from the photographic system to an image system.

The anchoring in matter that indicated the Silver print makes way for a more pictorial treatment.

And yet, as will have been understood, it is this selfsame “anti-naturalism”<sup>11</sup> that gives life to Belin’s black-and-white and colour works. She seems in this regard to identify with the critiques of colour by someone like Roland Barthes. Going against a common misconception whereby the addition of colour represents a gain in photographic truth, Barthes put forward the idea that colour was more of a decoy, a veil, a coating, to quote him, “applied *later on* to the original truth of the black-and-white photograph”<sup>12</sup>: a distracting element that gets in the way of the primary documentary essence of the photograph; he goes on, “a cosmetic (like the kind used to paint corpses).”<sup>13</sup> This last remark reminds us of Belin’s use of colour. Pieces of fruit made up like corpses, too bright, too shiny, exuberant pieces of fruit in their swellings and flashes of colour, like

fruit of course but which both in their development and in their finish bear the invisible hand of man: nature tamed and modified by the imperatives of the gaze. In this regard, the baskets follow on from the bodybuilders and the Moroccan brides; in the decorative profusion, abundance and exaggeration and in the relation to the sculptural model. The first neon recalled an X-ray of the human body, now the baskets of fruit, in their baroque exuberance, refer back to the bulging muscles of the bodybuilders. Making the subjects even more artificial, colour tips Belin's depictions even further on the side of this uncertain world, this halfway stage already noted by many commentators,<sup>14</sup> areas of uncertainty,<sup>15</sup> a world of pretences, of false imprints, where the subjects are marked by a loss of grip and where reality is always kept at a distance. This loss has led certain commentators rightly to stress the deathly nature of these depictions, as *memento moris*, or vanities,<sup>16</sup> or even to note the deathly grace of these images<sup>17</sup>: objects that are there and yet not there, which are so many traces or substitutes, often disturbing, of a human presence (bridal gowns, smashed cars, window-display dummies, ill. 28), inexpressive humans (half-castes, black women), bodies in mid-mutation and in search of an identity (bodybuilders, transsexuals, lookalikes).

For some time now, this reflection by Belin on the loss of grip has singularly accelerated, to the rhythm of her increasing use of digital tools, but also, more obviously, the general mutation of images, or more precisely beyond the recording tool of the contemporary world (animated, fixed image, sound) taken from the digital revolution. The latest works, starting with the "Métisses" (ill. 26 and 27) and "Modèles" (ill. 14) of 2006, are daily and increasingly fitting into this intermediate space which today is that of photography: no longer that of the inscription, the trace, but an undefined in-between. The point is that, series after series, Valérie Belin is engaged in a non exhaustive inventory of a world today dictated by the tyranny of the gaze: a world in which subjects—whether animated beings or objects—only exist for and through the other's eye. The baskets of fruit, she indicates, are made to be admired and looked at. This is show fruit. This fruit that is too good to be true is in this sense symptomatic of the world around it: that of a humanity that shows itself off and even, beyond that, which only exists in other people's eyes. In response to the fruit made to be seen are bodies that show themselves off—the monstrous bulges of the "Bodybuilders," the formatted faces of the "Mannequins" (ill. 28) or the "Jeunes Métisses" and the Michael Jackson look-alikes. This dimension is even more obvious in Belin's very latest series, coming after the fruit baskets. Rooted in the world of the popular show, they bring into play people whose main function lies precisely in this capturing of the gaze; in this regard, the art of the Lido dancer (ill. 15 and 25) in her sequined lamé dress joins that of the magician and his sleight of hand (ill. 16). Both disappear as individuals behind a type, the main purpose of which is to catch and guide the viewer's eye. So this world of the gaze is an ever elusive world of snares, booby-traps and

pretences; a world of delusions in which individuals come close to avatars, to return to this old term which the digital revolution has rejuvenated—the appearance a web surfer takes in a virtual world. Let us not forget that one of Valérie Belin’s earliest series got lost in the endless play of reflections and silverware, to the point, as at the end of the film *The Lady from Shanghai*, of no longer being able to distinguish the reality from its reflection, reverberating to infinity. The avatar is today the modern, contemporary version of the double, which has constantly haunted Belin’s work in various forms from the very first, from the look-alikes to the carcasses, from the dummies to the masks.

Appearance is now just an illusion, faces and objects alike demarcate a world of pretence, of falsity and imitation. Nature makes way for an increasingly artificial rendering, faces without depth, subjects in search of an identity, seemingly drained of their substance. The spectre of this new humanity is not all of a oneness: its characters range from the grotesque (masks, bodybuilders) to the unhealthy (look-alikes, models), from the working drawing (black women) to deliberate kitsch (Lido dancer). With no explicit denunciation or critique, the photography hunts down the presence of things while acting out the impossibility of so doing; not in the name of any psychological truth in opposition to the perceptible reality of photography, but more fundamentally because now it is the actual surface of things that is slipping away. This elusiveness of reality is also manifest in the refusal to name things. The device’s studied neutrality finds its accomplishment in the refusal of any title, itself referring back to the indeterminacy of the subjects treated.

The name “untitled” is tirelessly trotted out to designate each picture: every photograph by Valérie Belin is invariably and explicitly “untitled.” The series, on the other hand, are designated as simply and generally as possible by the purely conventional isolated common noun with no articles definite or indefinite.

This of course is to avoid any hint of a story, of literature, to nip in the bud whatever germ of fiction the image might carry. But beyond that, it is also a matter of designating subjects that are often really indefinite in the sense of indescribable: subjects nearly always in search of an identity, whose bodies are most often developing and metamorphosing (Michael Jackson look-alikes, transsexuals, young models, bodybuilders), so much so that they become difficult to *name*. And when the odd title does crop up, it is in the form of a decoy: to designate something other than what we actually have before our eyes, thereby reversing the hiatus at work between signifier and signified. Symptomatically, each Michael Jackson look-alike is given the name of his idol, in a perfect merging of the matrix and its copies. Faced with Manet’s painting *L’Exécution de Maximilien*, Georges Bataille thought of the strange operation to desensitize a tooth.

According to him, the representation had the coldness devoid of elegance of a surgical act without nobility. Faced with Valérie Belin’s works, what we seem to have is much rather a plastic surgery

operation. Each of her recent series evokes this operation to smooth out the world and its representations that is at work all around us in our everyday lives. Models with smooth features and no roughness, devoid of any powerful physical presence, whose artificiality relegates reality to the background. “Eyes without a Face,” to quote the title of a film by Franju in which the hero, already, grafted a young woman’s face in place of his wife’s after an accident.

Back again to Manet. His art took place at a time when all genres were in upheaval, with traditional pictorial practices being forced back from the inside and subjected to powerful outside pressure from other representational systems and values—from photography to non-Western arts, chiefly Japanese art in Manet’s day. What makes Manet so different and great was his synthesizing these contributions while taking into account the crisis of traditional representation, highlighting new potentials and pictorial values, firmly anchored in the reality of his time and killing off the great old narratives. It would be pointless and no doubt artificial to draw a parallel between Manet and Belin. We may just note how much she can be seen today in terms of these concerns, up to this access to “thinness, this flat transparency that is the strangling of eloquence,” this “untalkative art that tells no story” and which evokes “the strange impression of an absence.”<sup>18</sup>

A work that removes all reality from its subjects, which are metamorphosed in the purity of the photography act as Manet did in the “nudity of painting”.

<sup>1</sup> See the interview in this catalogue, on p. 30-51.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Avedon, 1980, quoted on richardavedon.com, the Richard Avedon Foundation’s website.

<sup>3</sup> Javier San Martín, “Beltza,” in *Valérie Belin*, San Sebastián, Koldo Mitxelena Kulturunea, 2003.

<sup>4</sup> Valérie Belin, “Interview with Nathalie Herschdorfer,” in *Valérie Belin*, Göttingen, Steidl, 2007.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Régis Durand, “La cérémonie des objets,” in *Valérie Belin*, Arles, Actes Sud-Fondation CCF for the photography, 2000.

<sup>7</sup> Régis Durand, “Valérie Belin ou la peau des choses,” in *Valérie Belin*, Göttingen, Steidl, 2007.

<sup>8</sup> Georges Bataille, *Manet*, Geneva, Skira, 1983, p. 96 (1st ed. 1955).

<sup>9</sup> See W. Ewing et N. Herschdorfer, *Faire faces: le nouveau portrait photographique*, Arles, Actes Sud, 2006, which included photographs by Valérie Belin.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Pierre Watt, “Memento Mori,” in *Valérie Belin, photographies, 1997-1998*, Centre d’art contemporain de Vassivière en Limousin, Artothèque de Caen, Le prieuré Saint-Michel, Galerie Xippas, 1999. <sup>12</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard, London, Vintage Classics, 1993, p. 81.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.

<sup>14</sup> Régis Durand, “La cérémonie des objets,” *op. cit.*, and

Javier San Martin, "Beltza," *op. cit.*

**15** Régis Durand, "Valérie Belin ou la peau des choses," *op. cit.*

**16** Régis Durand, "La cérémonie des objets," *op. cit.*, and Pierre Watt, "Memento Mori," *op. cit.*

**17** See Michel Poivert, "Morbidezza," in *Valérie Belin*, Salamanca, Fundación Salamanca Ciudad de Cultura, 2004.

**18** Georges Bataille, *Manet*, *op. cit.*