

Quentin Bajac interviews Valérie Belin.

In the occasion of *Correspondances Belin/Manet*, Musée d'Orsay – Argol éditions, Paris, 2008.

Quentin Bajac — I would like to ask you not why you chose Manet, but in more concrete terms, how you chose him.

Valérie Belin — When Serge Lemoine invited me to do this “Correspondance,” I was rather spoilt for choice at the Musée d'Orsay, which is a museum I know well, as I went there a lot during the period just after graduating from Fine Art School. Some painters I found very appealing. I am thinking of Courbet, I am thinking of Manet most of all, Cézanne not quite so much—artists who have helped to develop my approach to photography.

But Manet was an obvious choice in terms of what precisely I wanted to do at that moment, a kind of natural correspondence. The idea for the *Corbeilles de fruits* (ill. 2 to 7) predates the “Correspondance” project and some of Manet’s works, his *Corbeille de fraises* (1882) especially, struck me as validating my work in progress. Later on, things changed somewhat because the particular basket I had in mind was not in the museum collection. So then I discovered this *Vase de pivoines* (ill. 1) which, funnily enough, actually also presented some very obvious formal correspondences with the *Corbeille de fraises*: a very similar range of colours, with very markedly dominant greens and reds. It was a twofold correspondence, iconographic of course, but also in a more diffuse, formal way, in the coloured aspects and the plant like texture. So we might say Manet acted as a trigger, prompting me to go ahead and carry through my project.

Quentin Bajac — Among Manet’s still lifes belonging to the Musée d'Orsay, the one you have chosen is one of the more classical compositions, this bunch of peonies. Not the *Pivoines coupées avec le sécateur* of the same years, or the later *Le Citron* (ill. 19) or *L'Asperge*, from the 1880s, compositions which are much cruder and their sense, sometimes described as photographic, for isolating the detail.

Valérie Belin— This almost sophisticated aspect of the bouquet is something I again found in a very direct way in the fruit baskets that then took up my attention; they have this same characteristic of being highly composed, of being objects that are not so much made to be eaten as for being seen as purely decorative and definitely artificial elements. The fruit is not fruit in season at all. It is only there for its look, colour, decorativeness, comparative mass, and it is pretty inedible.

Quentin Bajac — And this is your first series of still lifes in colour.

Valérie Belin — Yes, chronologically it follows on from the “Métisses” series (ill. 26 and 27). In a way, we come back to the same treatment of colour, i.e. very intense, saturated colours that make the fruit look almost artificial. In that sense, there is also a correspondence with my earlier work. I

soon got the feeling that the choice of black and white would tip the whole thing towards a more nostalgic aspect, that of an early photographic tradition of the still life, close to someone like Roger Fenton. This was not what I had in mind. I was much more interested in being close to the kind of artificiality of present-day manufactured objects. And so, after the event, I realised that the introduction of color to the still life actually contributed to taking my work forward in the direction of a much more dematerialised or pictorial aspect. The works in black and white refer back to more materiality, to a more pronounced sculptural aspect, a veritable imprint of light.

With the move to colour, the image ends up being much more pictorial, because in fact what we see first is the colour, it is not a grain; the matter, the grain of the photograph, all that tends to disappear. I would add that for me colour, in the field of photography, is not a natural language; it is a dimension I took a while to come to grips with. When I started taking photographs, I had no choice, in the sense that colour was closely tied in with industry, and I had the impression it left no room for interpretation, in fact no leeway for interpreting. This is one reason —there were others— why black and white was the obvious thing to do in my early work. My late coming to colour and my renewed interest in it are ultimately very directly related to digital tools. In the end, it was only with the advent of image processing software like Photoshop that something gradually dawned on me: that colour can give rise to just as many interpretations as black and white. It was really only very recently that I have had this feeling of having total choice between colour and black and white, depending on the subject I want to tackle.

Quentin Bajac — Was this characteristic of highly contrasting colours, this “stridency,” to quote a term that has sometimes been used—often pejoratively actually—to describe Manet during this period, important for you?

Valérie Belin — Yes, absolutely. In fact I exaggerated it during postproduction, using digital tools, making it more acid, saturating the tones in what I felt to be a perfect match with Manet’s very clear way of treating his bunch of flowers. I used exactly the same type of light, very pointed, very direct, and this produces a heightened effect of contrast, looking for effects like a very deep black, in the gaps between the flowers and leaves. As for the neutrality of the ground, this is a constant both in my work and in Manet’s, this sort of neutral ground that tends to take the subject out of context and cut away any narrative content, putting an end to any thought of narrative. This is another aspect that was very dear to me and also came into it in relation to Manet’s work.

Quentin Bajac — Just now you mentioned Roger Fenton and the still lifes from the end of his career as a photographer (ill. 20), and notably the ones from 1860. Is this a model that managed to slip in between Manet’s work and yours when producing the baskets?

Valérie Belin — Yes, I do believe so; these still lifes are really on their own for their beauty and outstanding character. In fact they crop up again probably emotionally by chance, because these baskets are not my composition; but they do keep to a kind of classicism or traditional structure, they obey certain laws of composition which of course recall those you found in Fenton's still lifes, notably with the grapes.

Quentin Bajac — Yes, the grapes are very present in Fenton. With their iridescent effects, they really give structure to each composition, and also for you when you were saying just now how important the areas of shade are between the coloured elements.

Valérie Belin — Yes, in fact what Fenton's still lifes and mine have in common is that, in both cases, you find a kind of homogeneous block mainly due to these round elements, and especially the grapes, which form a kind of visual repetition.

Quentin Bajac — This play of areas of shade and areas of colour is interesting. At the time Fenton presented his still lifes, in around 1860, one critic wrote that as they were, in black and white, they were in a sense incomplete, unfinished, and that in order to take them all the way to their ideal of beauty, they ought to have colours, with, behind this idea, at a time when it was common practice to tint or colourise photographs... One other possible influence it seems to me, not to quote too many references, is Irving Penn. You often mention Richard Avedon, Penn not so often, and yet looking at these works, in their fully accepted artificiality, he is the one I am thinking of most.

Valérie Belin — Avedon, yes, I often mention him in connection with my work on the human figure and this recontextualisation linked to work in the studio and the uniform background, sometimes white, but not systematically so in my own case. But here, perhaps you are right in saying that Penn is more present, even though I was not thinking directly of him; we see here one characteristic that many of his still lifes have, this apparent jubilation linked to the object itself. But a direct influence, no. Like many artists and photographers, I am faced with so many influences and artworks which are there and probably being unconsciously integrated.

Quentin Bajac — You mentioned earlier the changing nature of your backgrounds, some white, others dark, or even occasionally coloured, if memory serves, as in the portraits you did for Azay-le-Rideau. Here, was black your immediate choice?

Valérie Belin — Yes, for me, it had to be a black ground, because black was already present in the shadows of the basket and provided a kind of linkage between the different elements of the composition. For a long time I entertained the idea of colourizing the black, so that it wouldn't be a pure black but slightly tinted. But as it turned out, the result became far too artificial and this broke the balance and tension of the picture, in a sense I was going beyond what I had initially intended.

Quentin Bajac — Added to that is the playing around with scale; with your relatively large size formats, we are moving away from the bourgeois still life formats in the Flemish tradition, which are still those used by Manet, gaining in monumentality, and enhancing the sculptural quality. It is a genre piece handled like a salon, museum piece.

Valérie Belin — For me it was not specially a matter of being different. This monumentality is constant in my work, even though here, it is true, we have particularly large formats. It is much more to do with very contemporary practices. It was important for me that the viewer should be able to get inside the matter of the fruit and be on an unequal footing with the image, which, it is true, lends the whole a certain monumentality while also reinforcing the artifice by giving the model a “larger than life” appearance. The choice of the printing process, the Diasec, also contributes considerably to metamorphosing the subject, by taking the fruit even further towards the artifice, the anti-natural—fruit that is there only to be looked at and admired.

Quentin Bajac — Can we come back, very concretely, to the way you proceeded prior to taking the picture; your work at the time of taking it, the very firm stances you adopt, the isolation of the photographed object, the great care taken with the lighting, the frontality, all this is familiar. What is less well known is the work that you do beforehand; here the choice of the model of basket, and the final composition are elements you definitely had a say in.

Valérie Belin — Absolutely, it is by no means some kind of *objet trouvé* or readymade. I called a firm I found on the Internet, which makes and markets these baskets of fruit. This firm has special models with some rather exotic names. The first time I went there, I saw straightaway that the arrangement processes were relatively industrial, fast and stereotyped and ultimately left very little room for any personal touch. I really had no opportunity to intervene in the work of those young women arranging the baskets. Initially I just chose a model without interfering in the slightest in the way it was made up. It was this image here (ill. 3), and oddly enough the composition turned out just perfect. There was a kind of dynamic to the composition, which was relatively speaking not too sophisticated, and so the image was successful: straightforward and direct. Actually, thinking about it, that basket reminded me of a kind of Lichtenstein canvas, like one of his brushstrokes.

Quentin Bajac — And a relatively unobtrusive base as well.

Valérie Belin — Yes, a base that luckily was perfect, at the first attempt. Oddly, it was afterwards that things started getting complicated. I asked for some other models out of their catalogue, but the second basket I had delivered was far too complex and needlessly sophisticated; the initial dynamic had been lost, because it was someone else who had prepared it. So I had to go on the spot, get myself accepted on the production line and finally contrive to work with the person who had made the first basket, and who had a rather slapdash way of working that was more suited to what I

wanted. After a lot of mistakes, I managed to obtain six fairly similar looking baskets, although they each had a kind of identity of their own —actually they were given names, the “Palm Beach,” the “Charleston,” the “Romaine”...

Quentin Bajac — Despite the somewhat rough quality of the end product, the rules of composition followed are designed to obtain a number of visual effects that are themselves very directly linked to classical pictorial representations, a tradition of the still life.

Valérie Belin — It is true that they are doubtless linked to representations, to a history of the still life or a certain idea of the still life, for I am not quite sure where these rules come from. We find almost exactly the same leaves and the same fruit as in 19th century baskets.

Quentin Bajac — Or even earlier, as with Caravaggio, notably the *Panier de fruits* in Milan (ill. 18)?

Valérie Belin — Or even earlier than that, with the notable exception, however, of the flowers in the 16th and 17th century still life, which have disappeared here. As for the Caravaggio still life, I think I had never seen the actual painting, maybe a reproduction, but you are right, when I started working on the baskets, Caravaggio was present —he is in any case in my work, for the austere character of his compositions, his very theatrical sense of lighting. We might think too of the young boy with a basket of fruit (circa 1593, Rome, Galleria Borghese)... But above and beyond the representations, these compositions also obey structural rules that are almost architectural.

Quentin Bajac — Complex architectures that in fact remind me of other aspects of your work on objects, the car engines of course (ill. 21 and 22), or the piled-up computers (ill. 11). But also, above and beyond the still life, in many ways the bodybuilders (ill. 10 and 23), who are also guided by this idea of nature being metamorphosed to the point of becoming an almost complete artifice, through cultural stereotypes and rules of composition—the bodybuilder fashioning his own body.

Valérie Belin — I hadn't thought of the bodybuilders. But this sort of accumulation, the artificial mounting of fruit, it's true, is actually very similar to what bodybuilders do with their bodies and muscles, their exuberance follows very precise codes. In fact the technical term used in making the baskets is to mount: you “mount” the basket.

Quentin Bajac — These are very precise codes that transform a classical aesthetic into a kitsch aesthetic, to quote a term that has sometimes been used about, not your images, but your subjects. A kitsch that often comes about as here from overdoing things: too much muscle, too much artifice. The bodybuilders are to a certain classical idea of the body as the baskets are to a certain tradition of the still life, diverted; here we are closer to Carmen Miranda and a kind of third-rate exoticism than to Caravaggio.

Valérie Belin — I couldn't agree more, and in fact I even lay it on a bit with the play on the colours, up to a saturation of sorts that almost pushes the image towards the supernatural, although the word is too strong. As regards kitsch, I dare say it is more of an attraction by default. I realised that I find it hard to work from an object that already has a kind of powerful artistic quality or legitimacy. I then get the feeling that it cramps my artistic style. On the other hand, I am very inspired by anything, briefly, in the order of the vernacular culture, of somewhat marginal objects, in the sense that I can take them over much more easily. Obviously others have done this before me, and this brings us back, whether we like it or not, to legitimate artistic practices: my attachment to Pop Art of course. I mentioned Roy Lichtenstein just now, but in a way these fruit baskets remind me of certain John Chamberlain sculptures, and so refer back indirectly to another aspect of my work, on the car engines for instance.

Quentin Bajac — Do you feel the same relationship of fascination-distancing towards these artefacts as many Pop artists do?

Valérie Belin — Yes, it is a distancing that I would actually go so far as to describe as almost hallucinatory; because really they are not objects without qualities, far from it. While they have no artistic legitimacy, they do have a number of plastic qualities, of forms and materials, etc., which are all starting points that enable me to work with the photograph, transfigure them, a bit like Pop artists do with consumer items...

Quentin Bajac — The reference to Manet speaks volumes in this connection; with Manet, we are dealing with neither a kind of prosaic realism as with Courbet, nor idealised Cézanne-type figuration, we are really in a presence, a being-there, of things.

Valérie Belin — That's true, and above and beyond a common genre (the still life) and a similar (vegetable) iconography, what catches my attention is indeed the way Manet relates to reality and to his tool. I am suddenly thinking back to other Manet paintings like *Le Citron* (ill. 19) or *L'Asperge*, in which we do find this attention to the essence of the object, this thing, this thing that is almost alive, combined with extreme attention, closeness to, or intimacy with the paint. I forget who spoke of "pieces of paint" in his connection; it is as if I were doing pieces of photograph, in a way, in the sense that there is the same attention to things' material, their seductiveness; This attention I feel these days I can only find with photography; through the specific qualities of photography, this coming up against reality that we find in the way matter is recorded by light.

Symptomatically, in fact, for me the lemon and asparagus still lifes are also highly photographic in the sense that they almost recall shots taken with a telephoto lens, with this artificial flattening of the picture. Also, there are doubtless other aspects of Manet's work that draw my attention, one being his attachment to Spanish painting, Velasquez – although for me it would rather be Zurbarán.

It is a painting that has always fascinated me and which is behind my motor photographs. At the time (2002), I should have been incapable of showing anything but industrial artefacts—depicting organic aspects, fruit, chunks of meat, for me was unthinkable. Yet the Spanish painting was already there.

Quentin Bajac — It is true that in a whole section of Manet’s work the ghost of photography runs through like this. And yet it seems to me that, compared with some of your earlier pieces, we are not so much dealing with a desire for the presence of things but more with the distance you take with respect to your subject. In this connection, if we compare your pictures to Fenton’s, his are more sensuous and marked by passing time, which makes them rather like vanities.

Valérie Belin — That is probably what I was driving at just now, talking of the more pictorial aspect of my work. It is true that at the start of my black and white work people sometimes used the terms *vanity* or *memento mori* to designate a presence, emphasised by some powerful, often slightly deathly lighting, of the object – meat, flowers – very literally many of these images were “still lifes.” With the use of colour, I feel I am exploring new directions, which in return have a profound influence on the work I continue to do today in black and white, from the magicians (ill. 16) to the Lido dancer (ill. 15 and 24) or even the bunches of flowers (ill. 25).

Quentin Bajac — How would you describe this new direction?

Valérie Belin — I think the appropriate word would be artifice; in my latest works there is more artificiality and less of this spectral character of things that you found before.

The intrusion of colour has no doubt favoured and reinforced this movement, which seems to be confirmed with the new work I am busy doing now. This artificiality thing was basically already there in my “Métisses” series, in the “Modèles en couleurs” series and in those I am working on now, in the “Danseuse du Lido”, for example, in which the artificial and the natural are closely bound up together—which in fact is also the case with the “Magiciens”.

As to the cause of this development, I would say that it probably has to do with the tool I use, particularly the digital tools. I feel it is worth stressing how these are things I do not fully control and they are related to technical advances that move the image, from the slightly outdated imprint of silver print photography to something more detached from reality and more pictorial, something which now belongs more to the field of the image. The more you work with digital tools, the more the work's snapshot dimension falls away in favour of what I might almost call the touching-up work, often after the event. The very way we build up an image is evolving, and at the same time we are faced on an everyday basis with this mutation of images which no doubt has its effect on me, notably with regard to this question of smoothing, cleaning, facelifting.

Quentin Bajac — The feeling of an overall facelift of the world with which we are increasingly confronted?

Valérie Belin — Yes, I think these things radically change the way we apprehend living things, as if we were seeing the living being reduced to a pure image. We may ask, what is there in our makeup? Is there something possibly to do with an essence? Or are we just an appearance, a totally malleable wrapping, pure images? I think musings like these are substantially fuelling my work today, even though this is also doubtless going to change fairly quickly, because I need this kind of speed in order to work. How, I don't know yet. But to come back to what I am working on at the moment, notably the "Magiciens" photographs, there is one almost kinematic aspect in the sense that the lighting I used is a light that recalls both the Harcourt studios and one that make video games more realistic. And so in fact, these people in action take on an almost impalpable character, like an image on a movie film. There is at this time an extremely dematerialised aspect in what I am doing, a definite loss of reality (*déréalisation*), including in these bouquets, by the way. Because what is also new to me is that this *déréalisation* affects both the works in colour and the more recent ones in black and white.

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