

PRESS RELEASE

V A L É R I E
B E L I N



Elysée
Lausanne

MUSÉE DE L'ÉLYSÉE LAUSANNE
UN MUSÉE POUR LA PHOTOGRAPHIE
OUVERT MA-DI 11 H - 18 H

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Valérie Belin's place in contemporary photography is unique. Over the last twenty years, she has developed a coherent and rigorous body of work that defies classification. The Musée de l'Elysée, which has been following her work for more than 10 years and has exhibited it on several occasions, has now organized a retrospective in conjunction with the Museum Huis Marseille in Amsterdam and the Maison Européenne de la Photographie in Paris. This exhibition constitutes a first mid-career overview of the work of this major European artist.

In the 1980's, Valérie Belin began to work in a radically new way, revolutionizing the traditional genres of still life and portraiture, and intervening in the very substance of photography- light, scale and chemical reactions. Her work proceeds in sequences grouping together objects such as mirrors, damaged cars, bodies, faces, bags of crisps or carnival masks. Organized in series, her images form combinations that complete and echo one another. Her style is characterized by its extreme precision; the use of formal composition with tight cropping and frontal poses that exclude any reference to a particular context; neutral black or white backgrounds; a large scale that dominates the spectator; traditional techniques that avoid recourse to digital technology; surgically precise lighting and special care devoted to picture grain.

The individuals or objects scrutinized by the photographer are chosen for their artistic or, more exactly, their photogenic properties. All of them contain an apparent ambiguity, evoking both strength and fragility, and they all represent an outer envelope that seems interchangeable. Her way of working requires complete immersion in her subjects and the process can be a very long one when she has to find just the right car wreck, the best doubles of Michael Jackson, an association of transsexuals or bodybuilding competitions. Valérie Belin never adopts a subjective stance. She excludes any artificial staging and all narrative elements. The use of black and white and the enlarging of the images transform the status of her subjects. By relying on the self-evident power of what is represented, divorced from its environment, she magnifies objects and exaggerates identities. Reality merges with its representation, life with artifice.

Deeply attached to the mechanics of the photographic process, Belin re-appropriates reality, creating images that are based on the repetition and the variation of things and bodies, echoing one another through her approach to them. While the wedding dresses of Moroccan brides and bags of crisps become monumental and spectacular, silverware, mirrors and black women gleam with a metallic sheen; dresses from Calais and masks emphasize the absence of those that wear them; models and sitters of mixed race oscillate between the appearance of living beings and inanimate objects; cars and palettes reveal their fragility; engines and shop window mannequins seem more alive than human beings; bodybuilders and transsexuals, like the Michael Jackson impersonators, exhibit bodies that have been subjected to extreme transformations.

In Valérie Belin's work, human beings are torn between the realities of the body and an ideal of beauty. Spectators move from fascination to unease, unsure whether they are seeing men or women, real bodies or a virtual creation, organic beings or sculptures. Belin is concerned with questions of identity, representation, beauty and metamorphosis. Without resorting to artifice, without retouching her images, she creates figures that seem to come from an identical mould, icons of a world that strangely resembles our own.

The exhibition has been conceived in close collaboration with the artist. The Musée de l'Elysée would like to thank all those who have loaned work for the retrospective, especially the Galerie Jérôme de Noirmont and the Maison Européenne de la Photographie, in Paris.

The exhibition will travel to other venues thanks to the generous support of CulturesFrance. In Lausanne, the exhibition has received the support of the French Embassy in Bern.

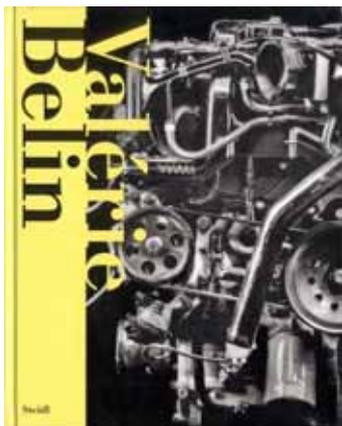
Curated in Lausanne by Nathalie Herschdorfer

Series exhibited in the retrospective

Cristal (1993)
Silverware (1994)
Dresses (1996)
Venice (1997)
Cars (1998)
Bodybuilders (1999)
Moroccan Brides (2000)
Transsexuals (2001)
Black women (2001)
Models I (2001)
Engins (2002)
Mannequins (2003)
Michael Jackson (2003)
Crisps (2004)
Masks (2004)
Palettes (2005)
Safes (2005)
Models II (2006)
Mixed race (2006)

A book is published by the editor Steidl for this particular exhibition. The work, striking by the sheer number of pages, offers an exhaustive view of Valérie Belin's work. Introductory text by the museum's three directors : Els Barents (Huis Marseille of Amsterdam) , William A. Ewing (Musée de l'Elysée), Jean-Luc Monterosso (Maison Européenne de la Photographie in Paris). *Valérie Belin, ou la peau des choses*, an essay by Régis Durand, art critique and independant curator who has successively directed the Centre National de la Photographie and the Galerie du Jeu de Paume in Paris.

Interview with the artist by Nathalie Herschdorfer, curator at the Musée de l'Elysée.



Valérie Belin, Steidl, Göttingen, 2007

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From the text by Nathalie Herschdorfer in the exhibition catalogue *VALERIE BELIN, Steidl Editions*

What's striking about your overall work is your approach to photography: before considering the object itself, your attention focuses on the way it's depicted, on its image.

My work, in fact, is about something that takes place beyond the object, and it directly engages with the possibilities of the medium. You might say I explore photography “from the inside,” through luminosity, scale, and chemistry—which makes it an imprint of light more than anything else.

Was this interest in the medium present right from your early work?

I became interested in light, radiography, and spectral imagery very early on. Strictly speaking, my first series weren't photographs of objects, but rather photographs of their luminous specter—I wasn't trying to show the object itself, but rather the energy it gave off. Take, for example, the photographs of wrecked cars: it was as though, metaphorically, I was photographing the energy of the moment of the accident. That's why I get very close to an object, which thus appears to “bulge.” Photography also allows me to bring out the potentialities of a subject. The large format that triggers a certain confrontation with the beholder, the tight framing that eliminates all context, and the use of black and white—all these techniques mean that photography becomes more like a kind of sculpture.

To which we should also add your choice of subjects. Your work always involves objects that possess intrinsic beauty; similarly, the faces that appeal to you always display a certain plasticity.

I don't take a documentary approach, I'm not looking for objectivity. I do indeed chose a subject for its aesthetic qualities—or, more exactly, for its “photogenic” qualities. The photogenic quality of a face or object is something pretty mysterious, which I discover while working and which largely depends on the choice of lighting. In the series of car wrecks, for example, the metal had to be crumpled and dark in color so that the sunlight emphasized the glitter of shattered fragments. The status of the object was also transformed by enlargement and translation into black and white. For me, photography is the magic of seeing a picture emerge, of attending the transformation performed by the tool.

In each series, the framing of the object is very precise and the lighting is extremely controlled.

Can you explain this important stage of the process?

This stage is crucial, it's the moment that everything comes together to shape the picture. For example, all my photographs require depth of field in order to get the greatest sharpness; it's essential for obtaining the effect of flatness and surface that I want. There may have been a lack of overall sharpness in the series of glass objects, but that corresponded to what I was looking for at the time, namely a kind of monochrome abstraction, a pictorial quality. Things then evolved, and I moved toward higher contrast, more defined photography, in which the object was present in all its materiality. But I'm not looking for extremely definition either, which would “stick” too close to reality. The grain of the image—the kind of “binder” it creates—is important in revealing the energy that the object gives off, to the detriment of straightforward depiction or description.

In your series of computers on pallets, the eye does in fact linger over details, but at the same time the overall object dominates the picture, like a sculpture. The anecdotal element and everything related to details then disappear, so that the image as such seems to have greater import than the depicted object.

True, but I prefer to use the term photograph rather than image, because we're really dealing with photography in the ontological sense of the term, that is to say an imprint of light reflected by things or people. It's a print, or impression, that can convey an energy to us.

In series after series, the use of black and white seemed to be your trademark. And yet color has triumphed in your more recent series. Why?

For a long time, black and white was the only process that gave me complete control over the image. These days, things have changed, in so far as digital tools offer the same control whether the picture is black and white or color. Take, for example, my two latest series of color portraits—in one of them I

wanted to produce pictures that were nearly black and white, almost monochrome; in other on, on the contrary, I emphasized the saturation of colors. For me, the choice of black and white or color is now determined solely by the subject and the results I want to get from it. In my early work, black and white assumed the quality of a blueprint or drawing, which for that matter subsequently produced a certain effect of style. In the same spirit, the portraits that I later did in black and white were schematic in an almost anthropometric way. Working in color now allows me to attain a new aesthetic dimension, different from the one produced by black and white. My work occupies various borderlines, places of metamorphosis where identity is never straightforward, never unequivocal—the borderlines that separate, for instance, the human from the virtual, and the organic from the sublime.

The series follow one another without ever overlapping. How do you decide on the choice of a particular subject?

My choice of subject-matter is always the fruit of some autobiographical necessity. Moving on from one subject to another in a brief period is another necessity, one related to the way I operate: the choice of subject always occurs progressively, there is a period of reflection and intuition, and then all of a sudden an idea emerges. Then there comes a process of research into the object and its context, which constitutes a large part of the work. To take an example of this itinerary: I started by taking photographs through store windows, which led me to shiny objects—light fixtures, as it happens. From light fixtures I moved on to glass objects. Then I decided that I had to isolate one object from all the others, like in a portrait, without the screen created by the window pane. Next, certain objects appealed to me for their luminous quality or their expressive power. The photographs of glass items—followed by the carcasses of meat—were done in ambient light, “on location” rather than in a studio. This aspect was very important to me at the time, because I had to immerse myself in the context and atmosphere of these objects in order to get closer to their “truth.” I wanted to avoid the anecdotal aspect of form, I wanted to get to the heart of things, of matter and light, almost independently of the objects.

Why did you then drop objects in favor of humans?

There’s always some link between the subjects I choose. You might say the common denominator is the body and its metamorphoses—its depictions, its poses. A human element was therefore always present in my photographs, before it actually appeared as such. Chronology is important when addressing this question: at first, I chose objects that had the power to evoke absence or emptiness; then I took photographs of Venetian mirrors that don’t reflect anyone or anything other than themselves, ad infinitum, so they become “narcissistic” objects taken to an absurd level; this absence of humanity paradoxically evoked a presence, and this opposition between presence and absence is always very present in my work. It was very strong in my photographs of wrecked cars, which are like empty cocoons. After the cars came the carcasses of meat, then the bodybuilders. It’s almost as though I arrived at the human element by an indirect route, or metaphorically.

Concerning the bodybuilders, you took photographs of them during contests but there’s no visible allusion to this context in your pictures. Why are they set against a white background, the same white ground used in later series?

If I’d taken photographs of these bodybuilders among all the others, I wouldn’t have obtained the surging, “bulging” quality of the body. The body had to stand out. The contest was a real public ceremony, there were thousands of people there, but this white background allowed me to yank the body from that context, to turn it into an object, a figure. For a fairly long time after that, I used a white background to detach a subject from its context, to decontextualize it. The body of a bodybuilder is pretty much like an object, for that matter, with its typical sheen. It’s also a body that evokes absence, it’s a kind of alienation from one’s own body.

So was the bodybuilder series an important stage in your work, a kind of culmination that brought a whole period to a close?

Yes, it was important to arrive at the human element. And next there came the photographs of Moroccan brides, whom I felt were a female pendant of the bodybuilders. Even though we were dealing with dresses, rather than muscles, there was the same kind of exaggeration, of display. The face became one element of an overall form, of a surface. There was no longer any depth—the body had vanished, just like it did with the bodybuilders: by exaggerating the volume of their bodies so much, it seemed as though they no longer had one. At the same time, the brides also displayed a few features of the

Venetian mirrors—certain floral patterns, strong black-and-white contrasts, and an ornamental, decorative side.

Portraiture is a major genre of photography with a very rich tradition. Which portrait photographers have influenced you?

Walker Evans and August Sander, for their radical approach, their success, and their virtuosity: Sander for the minimal, essential side of his portraits; Evans for his impressive methodology and for the sensitivity of his photographs, both things being related in his case. Later, when I started doing portraits, I became very interested in Richard Avedon, for the nearness of his sitters, the light on their faces, the monumentality of his portraits, and the way he was afraid of nothing and could appropriate his subject. On the other hand, the expressive side of his sitters is completely foreign to me—my own are absolutely inert, expressionless.

What's your intention?

Right from the early portraits, I sought a type of neutrality of expression, because any kind of expressiveness would have reintroduced some narrative or anecdotal element that was unrelated to my goal. The bodybuilders, for example, had highly expressive faces—often they grinned, which bothered me a lot because it went against the effect of absence and flatness I was seeking. I wanted the face to be expressionless in order to work toward a picture in which, paradoxically, the body would be absent. The relationship to the wrecked cars is obvious—same bumpy bodies, the same light. In later series there was this same withdrawal from expressiveness. Everything here is paradoxical, because the Michael Jackson impersonators, the bodybuilders, and the masks are potentially expressionist subjects. But the photographs cool it all down, hold the subject aloof, freeze or eliminate expressiveness.

Doesn't the question of identity arise with the bodybuilders and Moroccan brides?

The notion of identity arose the instant I started dealing with human subjects. Bodybuilders transform their bodies in order to become somebody else—their activity reflects a desire to become an “other.” For the brides, the ornamental garments symbolize the passage from one status to another, from girl to woman. In both cases, they're in a kind of a divide. With the Moroccan brides, I became interested in the face as a site of uniqueness and identity. In order to explore that idea of metamorphosis, that blurring of identity, I needed to find very special faces. Hence my interest in transsexuals in the early phases of their transformation, when the masculine and feminine elements are still blurred, still appear on the surface of the face like some not-yet-finished morphing effect. Transsexuals, like bodybuilders, are trying to change their identity, which for them means changing gender.

In your work, the face is not presented as a mark of individuality. Unlike traditional portraiture, which claims to reveal the sitter's inner life or character, here we remain on the surface, we have difficulty getting beneath the shell.

For me, phenomena happen on the surface of things, skin-deep. A fashion model, for instance, has a slick, neutral physique that allows everyone to project their fantasies onto him or her, which isn't possible with someone whose face bears the marks of a personal history. I'm interested in presenting an open work onto which everyone can project their own histories and allusions. Within the space of a single year I did portraits of transsexuals, black women, and fashion models. The identity of black women is unconsciously perceived through a cultural filter: they're perceived as sculptural, and photography allowed me to stress this “object” quality. The young models exist in a divide, a little like Barbie dolls that are either overly human or not-quite-convincing. For me, the culmination of this project is the series of really weird and disturbing window dummies.

These window dummies seem to be some kind of modern fetish...

I wanted to suggest hybrid beings, between virtual creations and archaic objects. So I looked for showroom dummies that had a highly realistic quality. And I wound up discovering a London manufacturer whose dummies are cast from real women and then recomposed to create an ideal being—the arms of one woman, the neck of another, etc. Since they were cast from real women, these objects are already three-dimensional photographs, in a way. By photographing them I exaggerated this aspect, their illusionist nature. The photographic medium plays its full role here: photographic grain is almost completely identical with the grain of the skin, the compositional angle and lighting are studied to give

a maximum degree of modeling. From a distance, it's possible to get the illusion of a live person; from close up, though, you see the artifacts, the false eyelashes, the brush strokes.

Your explorations constantly return to the idea of the uniqueness of a face. But these days there's nothing permanent about a face—thanks to make-up and surgery you can change your face to fit the canons of beauty of any given moment. Transsexuals and models reshape their faces, as do Michael Jackson impersonators.

The idea of the impersonators logically followed from my work on window dummies. In both cases they are manufactured beings. I began by taking photographs of various impersonators—of Madonna, Britney Spears, etc. But it didn't work, you couldn't really see who they resembled. So I radicalized my approach by choosing one individual, Michael Jackson, who has undergone so many transformations that he's already a kind of impersonator of himself. Then I took photographs of five different Jackson impersonators, and although they don't resemble one another, they all resemble the same mold via a kind of alchemy of transformation. After this exploration of resemblance, I began photographing masks, the kind of mask you'd use as a disguise, bought from a joke and novelty store, all of high quality and ultimately very "life-like." These masks are like real faces, but empty, in contrast to the faces of impersonators, which make you think of masks.

The photographs of safes demonstrate your ongoing attachment to objects. They're also very singular. What do these two objects, presented as a diptych, mean?

This series carries on from the pallets of computers because it, too, deals with scrap—although of another kind, here—which I found at a scrap yard when I was out scouting: a white safe and a black safe, which echo one another like a photographic negative and positive. These objects are not presented frontally as in earlier series, but from the perspective of an axonometric projection that nevertheless flattens their volumes, as though we're dealing with a drawing. I wanted to show the impenetrable—and, here, indestructible—nature of this object, whose shape has remained intact despite the aggressiveness of the bulldozer, as witnessed by the scratches on the surface. It's also a tribute to minimal sculpture. Minimal art had a fundamental influence on me. I was strongly marked by Robert Morris's formal reductivism and above all by Tony Smith's biomorphism and his blend of formal restraint with metaphorical power. I feel that my own work stems from a similar dialectic, the strong expressive charge of my subjects being frozen by the formalism of the photographic image.

Your work suggests monumentality, reinforced by the size of the prints, yet at the same time we detect a certain fragility in the subjects. What can you say about these two opposing forces?

Take the example of the pallets of computers: the object is solidly imposing, but the balance is precarious—we can imagine the moment when everything comes crashing down. Once we raise this notion of a fleeting moment, we're dealing with something very photographic. These opposing forces recur again, on a formal level, in the early series of glass objects: there is a rigorous, very systematic composition on one hand and a baroque profusion of objects on the other hand, counterbalancing that rigor. Finally, my still lifes could be perceived in two ways, either as virtuoso compositions in which the formal aspect dominates, or else as votive pictures evoking, for instance, in the case of the pallets of computers, a certain consumerist frenzy where almost-new items are already at the end of their lives.

Getting back to your choice of subjects, whether dealing with the car engines, the pallets, or the various series of faces, the beholder is first attracted and fascinated by the object on view, but then this feeling changes. Often, the viewer becomes appalled.

I photograph things that are simultaneously appealing and repulsive. That's probably true of many artists—this kind of ambivalence between seduction and freakishness. A work is never unequivocal, it's always ambivalent; otherwise, it would just be an illustration. There are antagonisms in my work between austerity and proliferation, between organic and inert or metallic. Sometimes the subject is very carnal yet at the same time disembodied: the body is there, but its life-likeness has been totally neutralized by the image. In the portraits there's always some doubt about what's alive and what's inanimate.

Why do you restrict yourself to a limited number of photographs for each series?

I take the number of photographs needed to make the intention clear and the demonstration obvious. In general, a series will contain eight or nine pictures; doing more would produce repetitions of inferior

quality. It's a question of rigor, of the standards I set myself. What matters is establishing equivalences between objects and people, and between different types of people—a little like variations on the same theme.

There's an exemplary coherence to your series, notably through a unity of viewpoint. What drives you, series after series? What are you pursuing?

Ultimately, I photograph the surface manifestations of things and people, like symptoms that are related to the body and the way it's exhibited, to the forces of destruction and metamorphosis it's subjected to. All of this, including the objects, refers back to humanity, either through metaphor or absence. It's an obsessive task—the subjects vary but they all express more or less the same thing. The early glass objects, for example, could be metaphorically compared to a body through which things pass, a transparent body.

In your latest series of portraits, artificiality dominates. It's hard to believe these people actually exist. Why are they so perfect, their hair so shiny, their skin so smooth?

The people I photographed were professional models. They have a special beauty, somewhat strange and exaggerated. This series is obviously closely linked to the showroom dummies. I asked the models to place their shoulders square to the camera, give a slight three-quarter turn to the head, and then stare straight ahead without looking at anything in particular. I wanted them to be similar to a three-dimensional drawing, unreal, like the avatars you choose to represent you in a virtual world. With this series I'm moving away from a social discourse that assigns a person to a class or genre—bodybuilder, impersonator, transsexual, model. Here, they exist solely on the level of the image. To obtain this effect I needed greater freedom in my choice of tools as well as in my choice of individuals. Colors, for instance, are desaturated, and the flesh-tones are diaphanous; there's a kind of disembodiment, a detachment of the subject, neither human nor artificial. The black background and the lighting that shows only one side of the models help to propel them into another universe. But there's always something unfathomable about a work, something you can't totally understand, because an artwork doesn't function solely on a rational level, it also—and mainly—functions on the level of impressions. I'd say that, compared to earlier portraits, these operate on a different register. Before, the subject was very powerful, it was primordial. Now the subject primarily serves the photograph—I transform it as I like, it appears through my eyes.