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VALÉRIE BELIN, REVEAL AND DECONSTRUCT

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Interview by Étienne Hatt

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Whether they feature faces, bodies, or objects, whether in black-and-white or colour, Valérie Belin's large-format photos do more than arrest the gaze: they disconcert it by introducing doubt into representation. The Pompidou Centre is showing some thirty works by this French artist born in 1964, representing series made between 1998 and the present. The Unquiet Images *(June 24 to September 14), brings out both the constancy of her concerns and the renewal of her practice in response to changes in the medium.*

The Unquiet Images features works from a dozen of the forty-odd series you have made to date. It's a transversal exhibition, but not a retrospective. What's the viewpoint?
Clément Chéroux, who curated the show, chose the prism of "the uncanny," the *unheimlich*, a Freudian concept. This feeling can arise, for example, when you see your reflection in a window and think at first that it's someone else. It's true that a similar effect of non-recognition can be found in my work. For me, this notion also evokes clichés and stereotypes. My subjects all have cliché status; they are highly codified images. But these clichés elude us because we don't recognise what we see. For example, in the 2003 *Mannequins*, the cliché becomes unclear, losing its apparent obviousness. A very recognisable beauty is dissolved into an empty plasticity accentuated by the size of the prints,

by the expressionless gaze, the overly smooth skin, the overly graphic shadows of the modelling. What emerges is the false, the cold and even the morbid.

The exhibition is articulated around your latest series, the *Super Models*, which reprises a motif you have already used before, the shop window mannequin. This is not the first time you have revisited a theme.
I am interested in revealing and deconstructing stereotypes by creating a sense of uncertainty that undermines their obviousness. Originally, it was more about typologies: the *Bodybuilders* in 1999, the *Black Women*, the *Transsexuals* and the young agency models in 2001, photographed using anthropological codes. Then it struck me that the mannequin was the ultimate stereotype. In the end, I have gone from subjects whose livingness was in evidence to subjects that have lost it. We increasingly doubt their reality. The mannequin partakes of this logic of de-incarnation, de-realization and the loss of livingness. In 2003 the mannequins were photographed in black and white. The precision was almost surgical. The hyperrealism had the paradoxical effect of making the subject less real. Nowadays I use colour and overprinting. The point is not to give life to the inanimate, but to set up a play of mirrors, which undermines the cliché from within. It's as if it is decentred by the intensification of its power. The artifice of overprinting is more effective in bringing out the vacuity of the stereotype.

The artifice of livingness

Nearly all the photos in the show represent human faces and bodies. Only three works, from the *Meat* (1998), *Engines* (2002) and *Fruit Baskets* (2007) series, don't have a human subject. What is their role?
They are counterpoints. My photographs of meat, evoking écorché figures, were a way of indirectly showing the human body. That false choreography of inert pieces was meant to breathe life into something dead. The point is a kind of still life that contrasts with the traditional iconography of the genre. It's also a perfect equivalent of a human organ. These pipes and pieces of rubber have an organic, almost living look.

The body is present behind those two images. But what about the basket of fruit?
Its strangeness is due to the colour, which gives the impression that the fruit is artificial, when in fact it's real. This artifice echoes the one used for the dancer at the Lido in 2008 and the 2003

Mannequins with which she dialogues in the exhibition. What she illustrates is rather the artifice of the living.

The Unquiet Images, the exhibition title, is surprising, coming from an artist who prefers the precise term of "photograph" to the more generic "image." How do you explain this change of term?
When I use the term "photograph" I am referring more to the process that I have chosen as a means, rather than to the end result. The result of photography is a photograph, but it is also an image, in the sense that a painting is also an image. In a sense, black and white, or the metaphor of the imprint, were simply the artefact of a process still marked by its "analogue" character at the time I started working with it. That, in the digital age, is no longer the case. I think it would be more accurate now to say that one produces "images" rather than "photographs." My work today is doubtless more "pictorial" than "photographic," but it already was at the start.

To what extent was the pictorial already present?
The two-dimensionality of the image has always been important to me. This interest is certainly related to my training, which was strongly modernist and against any reference to narrative or expressionism in the image, or to the representation of human figures. This modernist "rigor" was heightened by Marshall McLuhan's theory, that "the medium is the message." This emphasis on the medium led me to follow the upheaval of the digital revolution, which shifted the stakes for my own work.

When did this transition occur for you?
In 2006, when digital technology, offering perfect mastery and infinite freedom of interpretation, enabled me to take colour on board. Colour introduced an unreality that broke with the hyper-reality of my big black-and-white photos. To paraphrase Roland Barthes, this truth of black and white disappears behind colour, its illusion and its lies. It acts like makeup, a bit like a guarantee of life on something that is dead.

Did the grain give way to touch?
Yes, there was a whole period when I worked exclusively in black and white. For example, I started photographing transparent or reflective objects (glasses and mirrors), and it struck me that there was a kind of symbiosis between the purely luminous essence of these objects and the nature of the photographic medium itself. With colour, I then started making much more complex pieces, doing work that is, as you say, closer to what a painter does.

But black and white is still very much there.

This "transition" to colour didn't mean that I gave up black-and-white. Nowadays I usually take the shot in colour and I make the final choice a posteriori. Some series are both in black-and-white and in colour, such as *Still life*, made in 2014. But in that series, colour has the same unifying power as black-and-white. The use of gradated colours in post-production cancels the original cacophony of the subject.

Outside contexts

Your latest series are very different from the ones you made in the 2000s. Your approach then was apparently objective, in the documentary style. Your work this decade is visually much more complex. Can you clarify this change?

The effect of following developments and ontological changes in my medium has been to complexify the image, to produce images made up of four, five or six superimposed images in the first overprinted works, the *Crowned Heads* from 2009. Later, in the *Brides* and *Bob* series in 2012, I superimposed portraits and different kinds of images. The representation in my work has become more ambiguous, as if to call into question its obviousness or immediate apprehension.

The *Black Eyed Susan* series from 2010-13 could seem to suggest a fascination with the subject.

I am not fascinated by the subject. I try to deconstruct it, but uniquely by the work on form, not by any direct commentary. For *Black Eyed Susan,* I chose some very good-looking young women whom I dressed up with wigs, necklaces and makeup evoking the iconic beauty of the 1950s: an epitome of a stereotype that I tried to deconstruct by over-layering bouquets of flowers, another stereotype, but whose organic nature ensures that life remains present. As if two stereotypes fused and cancelled each other out.

But aren't these images still glamorous?

The glamour of some of my subjects, like the kitsch aspect, is cancelled out by my work on form, which creates an effect of distance. It is precisely this distance which makes these images "uncanny."

You follow technological developments but several of your recent series, such as *Crowned Heads* and *Black Eyed Susan*, seem to be rooted in the past. Why the anachronism?

Perhaps because beauty is, one could say, anachronistic by definition. But my concern is not so much to refer to a past aesthetic as to position my subject outside time. I'm looking for timelessness more than anachronism.

The impression is still of work that appropriates existing images.
That's because the subjects I choose are already images themselves. They strike postures, project an image. The work of appropriation is real, but it is done by the subjects themselves.

So it's very effective.
It's effective because by superimposing one image over another I introduce a feeling of doubt.

Most of your recent works give a new prominence to space. Have you let go the emphatic flatness of your earlier works?
When I use spaces, like for example the movie sets in the *Bob* series, or when I use a wide angle, as in *Interiors* and *Still life*, I ensure that the image remains very flat. I aim for dynamic effects rather than the evocation of space. I don't want its contextualizing effects. I try to place my subjects out of context and out of time.

Sculptures

You have always rejected narration. Can a montage of superimposed images, as in *Brides* or *Bob*, be anti-narrative?
I want to bring about an effect of meaning that is not narrative. The *Brides* superpose photographs of newlyweds and the windows of sex shops. The bride evokes slowness, ceremony and eternity. She is the contrary of the neon ads synonymous with speed—fast love, fast food: the society of immediacy. This encounter could be described as narrative, but for me it's more about evocation. In *Bob*, the same woman recurs from one image to the next. She is a burlesque dancer whose essence is that she is already an image. She has no history but is simply the embodiment of various stories sustained by the background, decors from different periods, over which she is superimposed. She has embarked on a Felliniesque journey in the history of styles. My additions enter into a dialogue with the subject, but this is not narrative. It's more two different images clashing together. In the *Stage Sets* from 2011, which superpose theatre sets, images of the same nature add a profusion of details and turn unreal. They are located outside any documentary or critical possibility.

At the turn of the century, though, several of your series addressed themes of identity and gender. Were you reacting to social issues?

No, it wasn't about that at all. Besides, that theme was much less topical in those days than it is now. Regarding my relation to the subject, my approach was much more simply empathetic. What all these subjects had in common was the desire to "be other," or at least to look like someone else, as if they wanted to be "outside life."

The *Pallets* series from 2005 appears to address in a very direct way the question of the obsolescence of consumer products. What was your aim?

I wanted to take a much more discursive and sociological viewpoint, but that position wasn't natural for me. It was also a way of photographing non-functional objects so as to turn them into sculptures. I first photographed objects, then people like objects, and finally objects like people. But objects can also convey emotion, like the dented, totalled cars photographed in 1998.

Do the photographs of safes come out of this same approach?

Yes, but that was one ultimate attempt at abstraction. A safe is a cube, a very abstract form. I chose a viewpoint that gave an axonometric representation of the kind used in architectural drawings, an abstract, non-human viewpoint. All that was to remain of the safe was its weight, evoked by its material. The safe is a hermetic black box that is totally indestructible. I also saw it as a metaphor for the black box that is the camera.

Safes also evoke Minimal Art, which is one of your artistic reference points. You also mention Baroque and Pop Art, whose influence on your work is more obvious than that of Minimalism. How would you define the heritage of Minimalism—one of the few American movements of the 1960s disconnected from photography—for a photographer?

The act of photographing "in itself" is something extremely minimal. Photography, for me, is not a window onto the world or the means of a narration. For me, photography is a material and a process, stripped of its exploitation of the social and its practical function of representation. The heritage of minimalism connects, I suppose, with this conception, and also with formal reductivism, the use of series and repetition, and the rigor of the protocols governing my work.

How do you reconcile two-dimensionality and sculpturality?

The principle of photography is that it reduces things to two dimensions. But photography has an intrinsic power of evocation, which means that we can see a portrait as a sculpture, for example.

That's the paradox of the thing. As a study of being, of its modalities and properties, photography is ontology and its finality is fundamentally abstract.

But you have never made any abstract photos.
My first photographs (I am thinking, in particular, of my photographs of fluorescent tubes, which paradoxically give the impression of being negative images) were, in a way, totally abstract. But I wasn't looking for an abstract form or trying to produce an abstraction. In fact, though, they were photographs of objects that are very real, shot in the most realistic manner possible, like radiographs. My approach has never changed: I photograph bodies and objects, but all of my photos can be seen in terms of abstraction.

So, there is a real tension between this desire for abstraction and the weight of the body, which is everywhere?
That's a very good metaphor. Yes, you could say that art is a kind of balancing act.