

# ELS BARENTS VALÉRIE BELIN

## DE MARSEILLAISE / FIFTEEN YEARS OF COLLECTING

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EXHIBITION CATALOGUE

HUIS MARSEILLE MUSEUM VOOR FOTOGRAFIE, AMSTERDAM, 2014

### **Valérie Belin (1964, Boulogne-Billancourt)**

With *Still Life*, her newest work, Belin astonishes the viewer with the enormously increased complexity of her subject matter and the incredible amount of detail that she succeeds in forging into a whole, then stretching like a taut photographic skin of light and shadow across the entire image. In this series, she works both in colour and in black and white.

In the substantial publication *Valérie Belin* (2007) published to accompany her first retrospective in Huis Marseille (Amsterdam)<sup>1</sup>, art critic and former museum director Régis Durand describes the tension from which he considers that Belin's work derives its power. He notes a number of paradoxes; for instance, that her strong interest in the material quality of a variety of surfaces lends them a sculptural quality which photographs, on the face of it, cannot actually possess. The monumental size of her works do indeed give this impression, however, partly because with her large range of soft, glowing surfaces (skin, fabric) and hard, reflective surfaces (glass, metal), it is as if she puts pressure on the illusion of space in which her personages and objects appear; "In Valérie's work the photograph only pretends to be flat, or rather to have a paradoxical levelness."<sup>2</sup> Durand then notes the opposition between the real and virtual worlds in Valérie Belin's work by showing that

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<sup>1</sup> After *Huis Marseille* this exhibition was shown at the Musée d'Élysée (Lausanne) and at the Maison Européenne (Paris); the publication is part of this joint venture.

<sup>2</sup> *Valérie Belin*, Steidl 2007; Els Barents, Bill Ewing, Jean-Luc Monterosso, introduction; Régis Durand, *Valérie Belin, or the skin of things*, see note 2, p. 15

there has been a gradual shift from her earlier images, which were derived from reality, towards the depiction of a more fictional reality which he calls “the register of false appearances”.<sup>3</sup> In so doing he not only firmly locates Belin’s work in the midst of the (then current) debate within the visual arts, but also gives us a clear description of its underlying logic. Looking back on these older series, he says that:

“ Instead of the subjects trying to look like a model it is the photographer who detects (or brings out) in her models common features on the basis of which she constructs a virtual stereotype of which singular subjects are merely the avatars. This process in a sense doubles photographic logic by adjoining to it a logic that one could describe as experimental – in particular the logic that governs the creation of virtual images. Where classical photographic representation, like the science of the same period, sought to identify similarities and differences in order to assign each subjects its exact place in the table of bodies and “species”, computerized science samples from the real the elements needed to reconstitute a model from which it is possible to make avatars – fictive and shifting “incarnations” that designate the appearance or the image that an individual will adopt in order to represent himself in a virtual universe. We are closer here to *The Matrix* than to August Sander”.<sup>4</sup>

A good example of the transition from classic, 20<sup>th</sup>-century photography to that of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is given by Régis Durand in his description of Belin’s series *Untitled (Black Women)*, of which the Huis Marseille collection holds Number 1, 2006.

“Here, on the contrary, the young women look very distinctive, spectacular and even baroque, with their extraordinarily elaborate accessories and make-up (false hair, coloured lenses, various jewellery and adornments). These women have literally reinvented themselves, pulling themselves out of anonymity and giving themselves an image that is personalised to the point of extravagance. Ultimately they embody another phase of artificiality: not the passive and standardized artificiality of the mannequin, but the kind that stands out and clamours for attention. Nevertheless, in a different way, this striving also makes them into figures that are fundamentally inexpressive and stand out only by the virtue of a secondary features. The paradox – and this is no doubt what interests Valérie Belin – is, for one thing, that inexpressiveness and artificiality can have two such

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<sup>3</sup> *idem*, p. 15

<sup>4</sup> *Valérie Belin*, Steidl 2007; see Régis Durand, *Valérie Belin, or the skin of things*, p. 13

contrasting faces: and, for another, that they confer on these models a power of expression that goes beyond their individual existence.”<sup>5</sup>

Valérie Belin’s recent series *Still Life*, on which she has worked since 2013, is also concerned with the collection of objects and accessories that have little functional or material value but which nevertheless embody the outward appearance of luxury and wealth. Their disposition in the images has nothing to do with their supposedly decorative qualities: Belin has photographed her collection of worthless objects as if it were a pile of trash, with no functional context whatsoever. In *Still Life*, collection and accumulation themselves are elevated to disastrous proportions. An explosive power seems to have been at work undermining the laws of gravity as well as materiality. The result is a tsunami of images in which these objects appear to float aimlessly. In the press release accompanying the first presentation of this series,<sup>6</sup> words like obsessive, hollow and science fiction landscape stand out, as does lunar to describe the disquieting effect of solarisation (when extreme over-exposure makes dark areas appear to be light and light areas appear to be dark) – the famous “black light” that so strongly marked her first series. Although one might ask why Belin chooses to battle with her material in this way, one must also conclude that she has mastered the new and overwhelming complexity of her work in every respect. Not only does she employ colour and monochrome side by side for the first time, but her control of light, the extraordinary density of all detail – the result of accumulating such diverse objects – and the range of different textures that this brings to the photographs of a sublime order.

The possibilities offered by digital photography are exploited in full; the power of Belin’s use of colour (with pastels and saturated hues side by side), the tactile quality, the treatment of light – everything is clearly the work of a virtuoso. The result is an extremely organic image, full of contradictions, that overwhelms and is at the same time as light as a feather. (Although in truth it must have been a Herculean task to create it).

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<sup>5</sup> *idem*, p. 14

<sup>6</sup> Galerie Nathalie Obadia, Brussels, *Valérie Belin, Still Life*, 22 April – 21 June 2014. [www.galerie-obadia.com](http://www.galerie-obadia.com)