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THE SATURNINE IMAGES OF

VALÉRIE BELIN

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Valérie Belin's photography is well-known for its dizzying mirror play between identity and image, reality and illusion. While exemplary of the artist's fascination for artificial beauty, her three most recent series—"the Lido dancer", "the magicians" and "the flowers"—also mark a turning point in her approach. More overtly oneiric than before, they cast a different light on Valérie Belin's previous groups of pictures, highlighting the fantastic atmosphere that has always subtly pervaded her world. The dream-like visions of flowers illuminate the nightmarish subtext of the photographs of carcasses and car wrecks shot in 1998. The fixed gaze of the dancer and the magicians brings out the hallucinatory aspect of the color images of models and fashionable young black women presented in 2006.

Until now Valérie Belin's oeuvre was predicated on the idea that a photograph is an imprint of reality. She viewed the tracing of light on the surface of the photosensitive paper as a defining condition of photography, likening it to a mold of the object represented. Although she has not completely rejected this quasi sculptural model, Valérie Belin no longer considers the nature of the medium to be a key element of the work, and as a result her approach is much freer. Digital technology is an ingredient of this change but it is not its cause. "Images" more than photographs, according to the artist, her new series offer no less faithful and exact renditions of the models pictured than before. They are just as much characteristic of Valérie Belin's obsessive desire to capture the reality of the subject at hand. Roland Barthes's notion that in the photograph it is impossible to separate the

referent from the image¹ may no longer be valid for the photographer. Nonetheless the stubborn and obdurate presence of the object is still what sparks her inspiration. A photographic Sisyphus, she tirelessly sets out to grasp the reality in front of her camera only to slip ever and again on its smooth surface.

But in the new images things and beings have begun to shed their monolithic shell. Slight cracks have appeared: in the magicians' series, they are to be found in the out of focus movement of the cards being shuffled and the sketch of a narrative ; with the flowers, they appear in the solarization effect and the cast shadows. At first glance, the photographs of the dancer seem closer in style to Valérie Belin's earlier works. A true professional, used to the military discipline of chorus lines, the young woman sat for the camera six times in a row in the same exact position. She appears in profile, cropped at the waist, similar to the black "fashion victims" and the manikins and live models previously photographed in series by the artist. However these models still referred to an idea of fashion and beauty that, albeit superhuman, reigns over our day to day lives. On the other hand, the splendid outfits of the Lido dancer—she is featured in the wonderfully named "Bonheur" ("Happiness") revue—directly transport the viewer into an otherworldly dimension of pure fantasy.

The artist was manifestly captivated by the Hollywoodian glamour of the cabaret's show. Similarly, the opulent, and at the same time poisonous beauty of the flowers brings to mind the baroque splendor of a film by Jean Cocteau. The cinematic aura of the three series culminates with the portraits of the magicians, which are lit in the style of the Studio Harcourt, a famed Parisian photographic studio specialized in portraying film stars since the 1930s. Yet there is no trace of nostalgia in these images. As always in the photographs of Valérie Belin, the lighting heightens the subject's presence, making it almost seem to "exceed", in the photographer's words, the picture's borders. Lit in this way, the figures appear suspended in an eternal now. In the case of the magicians, this impression is enhanced by the analogy with the special effects of cinematic computing, a computerized process used in video games to provide the characters and scenery with the cinematic realism and the illusion of depth and movement which they lack.

In the strange world of Valérie Belin, flatness and volume, two- and three-dimensionality seem to be constantly trading places. The bouquets float in an abstract space with no markers, no left, no right, no up, no down. The shadows bring out the contours of the flowers, creating thereby some sort of base. But it is an immaterial one, which, furthermore, is absorbed by the dark tone of the prints. The

¹ This idea is central to Barthes's major essay on photography, *Camera Lucida*.

magicians can be seen as the figures of a giant card game. As for the dancer and her ravishing set of costumes, she brings to mind a paper doll with her wardrobe of cutouts.

The young woman's repeated changes of dress are akin to the metamorphoses of some chimerical creature. Contradicting the perfection of her appearance, Valérie Belin considers her as an avatar of Medieval art and its passion for monstrous figures, hybrids of human, animal and plant forms. One might also see in her the "hard-hearted courtesan" portrayed by Paul Verlaine in "A Dahlia", one of his *Saturnine Poems*. Like the dahlia sung by the nineteenth-century French poet, the dancer, despite the "lushness and opulence" of her beauty, is a flower "around which floats no aroma" and who "does not even exude the scent of flesh."² Indeed, as in Verlaine's poetry, the paradoxical light of Saturn's black sun pervades Valérie Belin's three new series.

The influence of the planet Saturn governs the melancholy that haunts the eyes of the magicians. Completely absorbed by the task at hand, they almost seem alienated from their own selves. Their gaze is tinged with the "contemplative paralysis" described by Walter Benjamin with reference to the melancholic personality in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*³. For the German philosopher, the saturnine feeling was the source of the allegorical form that is a characteristic of Baroque literature. According to Benjamin, the allegory is always a conventional sign, and never, unlike the symbol, the harmonious incarnation of an Idea. Hermetic, artificial, static and excessive, it is distinguished by its "hieratic ostentation."⁴ Frozen by a bolt of light, the magicians are, like the allegory, enigmas to be deciphered. The meaning of their portraits, no doubt, has to do with the vanity of human life. Allegorical as well are the still lifes of flowers whose metallic splendor splits through a veil of darkness.

Identified with the Greek god Cronos, Saturn is also perceived as the master of Time. But the slow revolution of the planet Saturn unfolds in a time which has little to do with the intuitively felt flow of duration and becoming. Surprisingly still, the saturnine dimension of time is represented here by the oscillation between immobility and motion that characterizes the shots of the magicians and the dancer. In the first group of pictures, the dichotomy between the static pose of the men and the movement of the cards, which structures each portrait individually, is repeated over the whole series. Seen quickly and in sequence, it becomes animated with the staccato rhythm of a flip book being

² "Courtisane au sein dur...Fleur grasse et riche, autour de toi ne flotte aucun arôme...Tu ne sens même pas la chair...," Paul Verlaine, "Un Dahlia", *Poèmes saturniens in Fêtes galantes. Romances sans paroles* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), 73.

³ Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London/New York: Verso, 1998), 140.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 169.

leafed through or—more in tune with the theme of the images—of cards being shuffled. The photographs of the dancer, on the other hand, do not contain any trace of mobility individually. The repetition side by side of quasi identical images evokes, nonetheless, the process of stop-action animation.

Under Saturn's rule odd changes and reversals come about. Thus, in Ancient Rome, the *Saturnalia* was a festival during which slaves and masters exchanged their positions. These topsy-turvy days are the ancestor of our Christian carnivals. Polarized and inverted, the world of Saturn finds an adequate expression in the black and white of photography. Although Valérie Belin has distanced herself from the indexical conception of photography, the idea of the negative remains a cornerstone of her art. Because of their complex use of lighting and contrast, one might even say that her interest in the negative has reached a high point with the new series. But she does not treat it any more as a cast of reality. Rather she has retained its structure to convey the piercing vision of the melancholic, who discerns through the skeleton of appearances the sparks of an immaterial world.

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