

LIGIA CANONGIA

PHOTOGRAPHY AND ILLUSION

VALÉRIE BELIN : O SER O APARECER

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EXHIBITION CATALOGUE

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Photography and illusion

Valérie Belin's photographs have acquired a strong international identity by virtue of their acute interest in the relation between the real and the artificial and the ambiguous interplay between these extremes within the medium of photography. Belin explores the limits of the photograph as a document, a property inherent in its technological nature, and the resources of digital manipulation, which today seem to be perturbing the photographic order of representation and making it unpredictable.

The point is absolutely not to create strategies of facile illusion by means of virtual intervention. On the contrary, Belin seeks to use its potential to further the discourse on the nature of photography itself. What matters to her is establishing intermediary states between the plausible and the fictional, undermining the conditions of empirical verification, and deconstructing the factual parameters of the photographic "document."

In Belin's works, the fact is a suspended reality. It oscillates between the concrete and the transcendent, the recognisable and the strange, nature and artifice. And the production of artifice seems to constitute one of the artist's key instruments. Its use in photography is a capital resource for giving the impression of unreality, inscribed in her images.

Belin seeks exactly to undermine the realist symptom of photography. By means of incongruous atmospheres, sensationalist scales, artificial lighting and added pigmentation, she transforms this symptom into a fantasy power. The beings and things that are printed here acquire features that do not correspond to their original functions or specificities, in a process of metamorphosis that seeks

to refine up the referent. She thus uses photography not to record the real, but to transform it and endow it with imponderable, obscure attributes.

Silent, petrified images that closely follow the specific cut and fixity of photography, her works reject expressive or baroque signs in favour of a reductive, spare aesthetic where everything seems to be coterminous with its pure appearance. The production of these entities without reality, which emphatically affirm themselves as none other than absolute forms, inverts the function of the photographic mirror effect into fabulous visions that exist only in the poetic universe.

Human beings untellable from mannequins or digital entities, devoid of vivacity; still lifes with their exacerbated, vibrant chromatism and in the immensity of an unknown scale; luxurious clothes that seem to be resting like ghosts in coffins without bodies. For everything here is displaced or is nowhere, in a time that is not yesterday and that will be at no moment. This drifting in the spatial and temporal order of reality corresponds to Belin's effort to transform photographic referents into the entities of an admirable and eccentric world.

The *Bodybuilders* series (1999) – included in this exhibition – reveals some of the artist's main concerns: her deep interest in form, clarity and figurative precision, theatrical lighting, and the sculptural immobility of her figures. As if hewn from black marble, severed from any kind of surrounding circumstances and enveloped in light that is implausibly clear-cut and violent, the bodybuilders acquire a striking extra deformity in addition to the monstrousness of their bodies, due to the work of photography. In spite of the precise, classical character of their contours, the fixity of their poses and the reduction of their forms to emblems, these figures transcend the brutal obviousness of their formalism and touch on the marvellous, like Goya's *Giant* (1820).

Belin's ambiguous set-ups aim simultaneously at formal distinction and spiritual energy. The absence of drama and definition of the content, combined with their formal sharpness, takes us back to the classical paintings of Ingres, and to the sureness and impartiality of his figuration, free of theatrical trappings, psychological casualness and sentimental interpretations. Just like that 19th-century master, Valérie Belin seems to turn her characters into veritable effigies, detached from the ideological or moral framework of reality, as if they were inanimate beings existing in the void. Various series of portraits – "*Femmes noires*," "*Modèles*," "*Transsexuels*" (2001), "*Mannequins*" (2003) and "*Métisses*" (2006) already corroborated the hypothesis of a classical tendency in her work, which many have viewed as a rereading of minimalism because of its tireless repetition of its subjects and its emphatic narrative dryness.

In 2007 Belin created a series of still lifes in black and white, huge bouquets of flowers that, by virtue of the colour and the artificiality of the scale, seemed both alive and dead. Real and illusory, shadowy and oneiric, these bouquets summed up her interest not only in the fantastical dimension that photography can bestow on its referents, but also in the conjunction of the image and the actual stagnation and morbidity of photographic time. Some indeed argue that the whole of Belin's corpus could ultimately be seen as a still life. In the end, there is no difference between the spirit of these bouquets and the *Ballroom Dancers* (2008), despite the latter's suggestion of movement and allusion to cinematic dynamics. Scrawny, metallic-looking figures, whose bodies acquire the status of puppets frozen on the timeless and abstract plane of enigma, these dancers, just like Belin's bouquets, masks and cars, are all immaterial realities, pure images, fruits of a singular aesthetic experience that calls into question the frontiers between the real and the allegorical in art and in contemporary photography.

The hybridisation of traditional photography with digital processes, a constant in Belin's work, becomes even more obvious in the recent series, *Black-Eyed Susan*, from 2010. In these works, the artist creates layered images using transparency, in which the rigidity and artificiality of the women represented seem softened by the haziness of the floral backdrop. Belin notes that the curls of the hair and the pearl necklaces here create a romantic, elegant atmosphere reminiscent of the 1950s, and observes that: "The beads also create a formal link between the flatness of the figure and the relief of the bouquet. I created and photographed the bouquets at a later stage, associating them with the portraits I had already made. I wanted to create a kind of vegetal, decorative pattern like wallpaper. [...] I worked by simultaneously adding forms and subtracting information so as to create a kind of equivalence in the image between the woman and the flowers. This assemblage thus puts them on the same level in terms of importance. The woman and flowers have the same status as pure decoration, pure surface."¹

To reduce objects and beings to simple surfaces is to flatten out differing materials, to erase their identities and turn them into neutral existences and pure forms that meld perfectly on the photographic paper on which they are printed and in the fictional world that they inhabit. Here we might recall Roland Barthes' words to the effect that photographic entities are "paper beings,"² made

¹ Belin, Valérie – in a text sent to the author.

² Barthes, Roland, « *Structural Analysis of Narratives* », *A Barthes Reader* (ed. Susan Sontag), Vintage Classics, 1993 (repr.), p. 282.

of the material that feeds all fiction. Belin thus explores “the Barthesian expression in three different senses: paper beings because lacking in reality and lacking soul, but also as photographs.”³

In the same way we can, in this context, refer to the world of Pop, which reduced the “persona” to standard forms and stereotypes, disincarnate and empty, with nothing to distinguish them from the world of objects. The impersonal notion that characterised Pop figuration erased the existential question in favour of the flattening of identity and its reduction to simple formulae, lost amidst so many other products of the world’s “surface.” Like a still life, the Pop “persona” was condemned to the inexpressiveness of objecthood and to the uniformity of decorative and superficial values. Belin seems to reorient the Pop approach towards radical strategies, organised precisely around the transformation of the living being as pure image. It is no coincidence that her chosen medium should be photography, which was fundamental to the formulations of Pop Art.

For this exhibition at the Casa França-Brasil, the Black-Eyed Susan series has undergone some notable modifications that innovate with regard to the rest of the oeuvre. The photographs are presented on huge panels made up of twelve television screens, animated by a continuous chromatic throbbing, the artificiality of which is further heightened by the luminescence of the support. The monumental digital video installation is close to the spirit of stained glass windows, which by their very nature belong to the decorative tradition. The exceptional importance of “decoration” in modernism, via the experience of the emancipation of colour, as seen in Matisse and Gauguin for example, seems here to be reinvigorated by the movement of the images and their hypnotic character. In these pieces Belin is accentuating the role played by colour in her work since the early 2000s, taking it to a point of extreme saturation where it questions the limits of photographic fixity. As she puts it herself, “it is a form of degradation, the beauty of which lies in the luminous impulsion that tries to infuse the fixed image with a living appearance.”⁴

By producing what look like “living” still lifes, Belin’s work operates an experimental shift towards the resources of light, as if the pulsing light could paradoxically unfreeze the image without affecting its static nature. The light and artificial dynamic of video, like those of cinema, may ultimately serve only to intensify the illusion, the magic and the uncertainty that photography never initially foresaw. With great economy and subtlety, Belin forces photography to bend to illusion, by conclusively setting it on the unstable plane of half-truths and poetry. Picasso himself said that “from the point

³ Canongia, Ligia, « Meias-verdades », exh. cat. *Oi Futuro Rio de Janeiro*, 2009.

⁴ Belin, Valérie – *loc. cit.*

of view of art there are no concrete or abstract forms, but only forms which are more or less convincing lies.”⁵

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⁵ Picasso, Pablo, quoted in Herschel B. Chipp (ed.), *Theories of Modern Art*, University of California Press, 1984, p. 264.