

# QUENTIN BAJAC

# DETACHING FROM

# PHOTOGRAPHY

VALÉRIE BELIN 2007-2016

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## Detaching from photography

"I think it is interesting to point out that these are phenomena I don't completely control and that have to do with the technological changes as a result of which the image is moving, from the slightly archaic imprint of silver-based photography towards something more detached from the real and more pictorial, something that is now more in the domain of the image."<sup>1</sup> This reflection that Valérie Belin articulated in 2008 offers a vital clue to the radical evolution of her work since the mid-2000s. It helps explain the numerous changes she has made since 2005 to the very precise working protocol she put in place and had faithfully followed since the start of her career in 1993. Ever since that time, anticipating and then accompanying the mutations of photography, from analogue to digital, Belin's main concern had effectively been to question the indexical nature of a medium, then undergoing dramatic changes, by playing on its ambiguities and contradictions. To do this, she had developed a system whose chief characteristics she enumerated in 2003: absolute frontality, with the view camera set squarely opposite the subject, without the slightest angle, in order to minimise distortion; radical two-dimensionality, obtained notably by means of lighting and serving to dispense with the notion of realistic modelling by putting each detail on the same level (in every sense of the term); absence of context, with all the subjects photographed indoors against a neutral black or white ground; the precise rendering of matter, whether artificial or natural, based on the modernist belief that the role of photography is to render the surface of "the thing itself," in the words of photographer Edward Weston; the considered choice of subjects, with what Belin described as "expressionistic" qualities – subjects with a strong emotional and visual impact (wrecked cars, delicate Moroccan

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<sup>1</sup> *Correspondances: Valérie Belin, Edouard Manet, Musée d'Orsay-Éditions Argol, 2008, p.50.*

wedding dresses, totems of discarded electronic equipment, the oiled bodies of bodybuilders, etc.); and to conclude, the exclusive use of black-and-white. Colour did not appear in her work until 2004, but more on that later.

In its invariance and precision, this system could be compared to a meticulously elaborated scientific protocol. In her studio/laboratory, Belin seemed to be trying to verify the *reality* of her subjects, subjecting them to the test of the photographic act, transforming bodies into images and presence into representation, reifying animated subjects and, conversely, bringing inert objects alive. And if she took up some of the codes of a documentary tradition that runs through twentieth-century photography, from Blossfeldt to Avedon – the neutral ground isolating the subject, the exclusive use of black-and-white –, at the same time, she also set herself apart with images that were anti-naturalistic, often verging on the supernatural; images that were, in Delacroix's words, "false because [...] so exact,"<sup>2</sup> and deliberately upset the idea of the medium's neutrality. In her case, photographic transformation at times had something of the precipitate in the chemical sense of the term, with materials and substances sometimes gaining in presence and solidity; and at others, something of the reduction, in the sense of abstraction – and often, curiously, a bit of both. The choice of expressionistic subjects, to which her relation was a mixture of fascination and repulsion, only heightened this semi-hallucinatory dimension.

In that regard, she could no doubt have repeated the oft-cited words of Garry Winogrand, however remote this photographer might at first view seem from her own aesthetic: "I photograph to find out what something will look like photographed." When asked what he meant, Winogrand added the following, which also seems to be applicable to Belin's approach: "Well, I don't think it was that simple [...] There are things I photograph because I'm interested in those things. But in the end, you know what I'm saying there. Earlier tonight, I said a photograph isn't what was photographed, it's something else. It's about transformation. And that's what it is."<sup>3</sup> More than the presence of the subjects that Belin photographed, and whatever their nature – human or object –, and whatever the degree of interest or attraction she felt for them – strong or weaker –, it was also and perhaps more the deceits, the surprises – in a word, the possibilities and limits of photographic representations – that compelled her attention.

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<sup>2</sup> Delacroix on the daguerréotype, in Eugène Delacroix, "Revue des arts," *Revue des deux-mondes*, September 1850, p. 1139-1146.

<sup>3</sup> *Visions and Images: American Photographers on Photography, Interviews with photographers by Barbara Diamonstein*, New York: Rizzoli, 1981–82.

Since the mid-2000s, Belin's creative process has accelerated. Since the *Métisses* and *Modèles II* of 2006, her works have, day after day, become more involved in the intermediary space that photography has now become: not that of the inscription, of the trace, but that of an indefinite in-between. In addition, comes the much deeper feeling, diffusely present in Belin's work, that beyond the mutations of the tool, it is her subjects themselves that are increasingly elusive. Her conclusion? That it is getting more and more difficult to capture even the surface of things. Whereas the American photographer and an important figure for her, Richard Avedon, could still affirm in the 1980s that photography, and his own pictures in particular, were "readings of the surface," simple captures of the external envelope of beings, Belin seems to have come to the conclusion that *not even that* is possible now.

If we look at the evolution of her subjects, it is clear that since 2004-2005, these have increasingly been chosen for their appearance quality, even as simulacra: inexpressive young fashion models; bodies shaped to resemble others (bodybuilders, Michael Jackson lookalikes); the world of the performing arts and illusion (dancers and sets from the Lido, magicians, ballroom dancers, beauty queens); ceremonial still lifes (ostentatiously overabundant baskets of fruits and bouquets). This is because, one series after the next, Belin is building a non-exhaustive inventory of the world, today governed by the dictatorship of the gaze: a world in which subjects – be they animated beings or objects – exist only for and through the other's gaze. "I photograph images," she even claims. And starting in 2007 with the *Danseuses du Lido*, these *images* are increasingly issued from a register that can be described as kitsch: after the Lido, then, came beauty queens, magicians, ballroom dancers, baskets of fruit, strippers, all of whom share a very distinctive and often dated aesthetic that is radically alien to modern canons. The references to Pop Art and Minimalism visible in some of her earlier work are disappearing in favour of what could be described as deliberate retro imagery. Paradoxically, the effect of this development is to make the image even more timeless and archetypal by stripping any anecdote that could relate it to the period or fashion.

In 2004-2005, Valérie Belin decided to loosen up her initial system by integrating various elements in order to fully take into account the recent developments in the medium – a general mutation of images and the growing artificiality of the contemporary world. There was at the time in her work a very strong feeling that these transformations necessitated a redefinition of her photographic protocol, to escape obsolescence. At the time, she elegantly expressed this with the notion of "detachment from photography" – understood here as analogue language. The sense that photography's irrevocable entry into the digital era, while it fully confirmed some of her intuitions concerning the objectivity of the medium, at the same time made some of her working methods

outdated and undermined the pertinence of some of her questions about the medium's regime of truth. In terms of working method, it seemed important to take the new situation into consideration, one of generalized digital postproduction. In other words, to break away from a certain "mystique" surrounding the act of taking a photograph, seen as the key moment in the making of the image and that coloured her earlier system, in favour of a conception that was more open to the subsequent work, done on the computer and which has now become central to her creative process. In terms of her reflection, she had to include the changing perception of photographic representation, the authority and utility of which were eroding, and whose once particular status was now coming closer to that of other, pre-photographic images. In short, that of a medium that seemed to be losing its specificity and to participate fully in the larger regime of the image. It was now a matter not of claiming to make photographs, but instead of producing images using all the tools offered by digital technology, thus opening up the full range of possibilities. The most obvious evolution in Belin's work in the mid-2000s was thus the appearance, in various forms, of retouching and manipulation, done after the taking of the photograph, which can be considered as so many deviations from a photographic practice that had hitherto been marked by a certain modernist purism: if the ultimate goal, namely, the objectification of the motif, had remained unchanged, the metamorphosis that was once achieved with the camera was now effected via the computer.

The first and most important of these infringements is the use of colour, which Belin has always seen as a manipulation occurring after the photograph is taken and not as a natural inherent component of the photograph. Inaugurated in 2004 on the occasion of a commission for the Centre National des Arts Plastiques and *Images au Centre* at the Château of Azay-le-Rideau, this use of colour ended eleven years of systematic use of black-and-white. As of *Modèles II* in 2006, it becomes more frequent in her work, even if black-and-white remains predominant. Belin has explained her ambivalent relation to colour: her initial wariness was not related to aesthetic positions, but more to the desire for total control of the finished image, something only black-and-white allowed her. In the mid-2000s, however, she says, digital tools overturned this initial situation by giving her more ways of intervening, of changing and therefore controlling the chromatic values – a realization that indeed she shared with other photographers during that period. "My late incursion into colour and my renewed interest in it are, ultimately, very directly linked to digital tools. In the end, it is only since the appearance of image processing software like Photoshop, that I have gradually become aware of one thing: colour can afford as many interpretations as black-and-white. In fact, it was only very

recently that I felt I could choose with complete freedom between colour and black-and-white, depending on the subject I wanted to deal with," she explained in 2008.<sup>4</sup>

The anchoring within the matter, signalled by silver-based recording, now leaves way to an almost pictorial treatment. "With the transition to colour, the image ultimately becomes much more pictorial, because in fact, what you see first is the colour, not a grain: matter, the grain of photography, all that is now disappearing."<sup>5</sup> But then, when talking about Belin's work, the word "colouring" would probably be more appropriate than "colour." In many respects, Belin's images in colour intentionally look more *coloured* than *in colours*, a bit like those nineteenth century black-and-white photographs that were then hand-painted, or black-and-white films that have been coloured for the benefit of some contemporary audience. Significantly, Belin herself compares her use of colour to an operation of "making-up."<sup>6</sup> The term is delightfully polysemous, and could suggest notions of beautification, but also artifice (*le fard* in Baudelaire and Barthes) and the usually fraudulent dissimulation of reality. Whatever the meaning we give it, to make-up is always to move away from nature – to *denature*. As we have all had occasion to observe, these coloured additions, the function of which is, in most cases, to heighten the realism of the image by going beyond the stylisation inherent to the use of black-and-white, usually produces the opposite effect: the initial representation loses its reality. Belin is well aware of this: with the help of digital manipulation, she works on the colour *a posteriori*, with no concern for naturalism, and even systematically keeping naturalism of any kind at distance. Whether it is light, as in her *Modèles II*, gentle and old-fashioned as in *Black Eyed Susan*, or taken to extremes and vibrant as with *Métisses*, *Corbeilles de fruits*, *Vintage Cars*, or *Still Life*, its function is always to muddy the image's photographic identity and heighten the artificiality of what is photographed: the soft colours of *Modèles II* accentuate the "virtual ectoplasm"<sup>7</sup> feel, while the stridency of *Corbeilles de fruits* transforms them into Sarreguemines' majolicas.

Since 2009, in addition to what can be called colourisation, however, Belin has been using other kinds of post-photographic digital manipulations, all of which emphasises the hybrid, graphic and

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<sup>4</sup> **Correspondances : Valérie Belin, Edouard Manet, Musée d'Orsay-Éditions Argol, 2008, p. 36.**

<sup>5</sup> **Ibid, p. 33.**

<sup>6</sup> **"Colour [...] acts like makeup, a bit like a guarantee of life on something that is dead." "Valerie Belin, Reveal and Deconstruct," interview with Etienne Hatt, *artpress*, no. 424, July-August 2015, p. 38.**

<sup>7</sup> **Régis Durand, "Valérie Belin ou la peau des choses," *Valérie Belin*, Steidl, 2007, p. 14.**

artificial dimension of her work. Solarisation and superimposition, two terms that recall the experiments of avant-garde photography between the wars, gain a new topicality here in the effects obtained by the retouching and processing software brought about by the digital revolution. But also, in either cases, we find those figures of photographic “botching” (superimposed images, misdeveloped images) that, before they were accepted as creative acts, were seen as deviations from a certain kind of photographic realism. In this respect, superimposition and solarisation were, both in film and photography, associated not so much with *seeing* as with *vision* – that is, something inward and oneiric. Without a doubt, effects close to solarisation (the *Décors*, *Brides*, *Bob* and *Intérieurs* series, and some of the *Still Life*), as well as the combination of different images in the manner of superimposition (*Têtes couronnées*, *Black Eyed Susan*, *Décors*, *Brides*, *Bob*, *Intérieurs* and *Super Models*), make for images that are harder to read. Superimposition brings into play multiple viewpoints: primarily a sense of *overflowing* of the image. The gaze is saturated by an abundance of sometimes contradictory visual signs which overlay and intermingle so as to subvert traditional perspectival space: the gaze never manages to settle or read the image depth-wise, to isolate each of its components. Both the represented object and representation itself lose some of their reality. This over-taxing of the gaze is at its most extreme in the *Brides* and *Bob* series, in which Belin seems to combine in the same image several subjects from earlier series: young women, floral motifs, accumulations of objects, all kinds of inscriptions – here, brides and shop fronts (electronic goods, sex shops), there burlesque dancers and jumbles of objects. She is offering us a new take, based on fusion and addition, on what is a central idea in her work: the contamination of the human and the object, of the animate and the inanimate. The fusion becomes even more complete in the most recent series, *Super Models*, from 2015: the outlines of the models’ bodies literally melt into the colourful arabesques of the graphic software, introducing a new dynamism into her work.

The solarisations bring into play the same principle. Sometimes, too, combined with superimposition (as in the *Décors* series), they result in a transformation of values and an evening-out of tones that also obstruct the clarity of the image and its deep legibility: black here looks like light grey, while the white darkens, and bodies lose their physical materiality. Reading them is all the more difficult, since Belin’s subjects – the overloaded sets of the Lido, the object-cluttered interiors of collectors’ homes, or her most recent still lifes saturated with various artefacts – are already very complex in themselves, following on from the expressionist, affect-laden subjects that she has always been drawn to. The beholder is thus more likely to be disoriented once again, as Belin revisits some of the effects tested in her early work – the *Argenteries* (1994) the *Miroirs vénitiens* (*Venise I* and *II*, 1997) –, but using different methods and in a different mode: the difficulty to read the space, the confusion in perceiving depths, the near and the far, the full and the empty, the concave and the convex, the

real and its reflection. Heightening the difficulty of reading, the emphatically small format also connects *Intérieurs* to the early series, conferring a delicate, precious quality close to the miniature to these images. And, when combined with the solarisation's inversion of values, the modest size evokes the distant and outdated photographic tradition of the daguerreotypes (whose values changed with the angle at which the plate was read), heightening the timeless feel of these images.

The *Intérieurs* and *Décors*, and the superimpositions of the *Brides* and *Bob* pieces, as well as the *Vintage Cars*, bring Belin to leave the anonymity of the studio for the first time and to make her images in the outside world. Since 1992, she had always practised the closely supervised studio view as a way of ensuring control of the finished image; but now, in 2007, she began leaving the studio for the stage of the Lido (*Décors*) and the galleries of the automobile museum in Mulhouse (*Vintage Cars*). Later, in 2012, the collectors' apartments of *Intérieurs*, and the shop fronts of the *Bob* series were an opportunity for her to invoke other, more purely documentary photographic genres (for the former, Atget's *Intérieurs*, and for the latter, American street photography). In all these examples, her work is evincing a new determination to rework a particular documentary model in an anti-naturalist vein by means of superimposition and solarisation, the handling of colour and the use of wide-angle lenses (*Vintage cars*, *Intérieurs*), with all the deformations in terms of heightened perspective implied by the use of such material. Following this logic, one could see the recent developments in her work as perhaps the ultimate phase in this movement out of the studio and detachment from photography. *Black Eyed Susan*, the video made in 2011 based on the eponymous photographic series from 2010, and the performance *MJ6* created in 2013, a choreography based on her 2003 series of Michael Jackson lookalikes, both seek to pursue photography by other means, almost completely emancipating themselves from the fixed image. What next? I shall end with an assumption, or a wager on the future: after a first decade of black-and-white photography marked by the paradigm of sculpture (work on matter and a certain monumentality), then a second, more pictorial one (with emphasis on flat tint, graphic retouching, the introduction of colour), the third should surely be one of motion.

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