

# RÉGIS DURAND

# VALÉRIE BELIN, OR THE SKIN OF THINGS

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### **Valérie Belin, or the skin of things**

It would be possible to approach the work of Valérie Belin through a study of skins – the (literal) skins of the humans or humanoids that she photographs, and the (metaphorical) skins of her images in general, which all attempt to grasp surfaces, envelopes, fine integuments (a transparent film, a reflection, a shininess, a weave). Everything is, in a sense, a matter of skin, and of the way in which these skins catch the light, the way their texture, their grain, come to life under the eye of the lens. That is the paradox of these images which are imposing in their size, and often massive, full-frame, which seem to come towards us with the greatest power of manifestness, in a dialogue that is not unlike the one we have with sculpture.

For there is, of course, in modern and contemporary sculpture, a constant concern with surfaces and their complex relation to the volumes they define – or that define them, of which they are the point of resolution, where the thrust or attraction of that volume are at their greatest. And we know about the use that many artists make of this constant tension between volume and surface: Brancusi, for example, who indeed used photography to grasp the way in which the smoothness of surfaces and the reflections that it generates endlessly prolongs and multiplies the thrust of the volume, and make it changeable like light and time; or Tony Smith, whose surfaces seem on the contrary to point us to an intrinsic opacity, a black hole whose attraction they nevertheless resist by turning towards what is outside them; or, again, Larry Bell and those glass cubes that, says the artist, are “just surface and light.”<sup>1</sup> These complex relations draw their meaning in a sculptor’s work from the field of possibilities that are available to him, which he can freely play on or abstain from playing on: matter (its weight

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. interview with Henry-François Debailleux, *Libération*, 8/9 July 2006, p. 39

and bulk), the material (its finish, its extent), the inscription of the work in space and the relation it induces with the beholder. For a photographer, the field of possibilities is obviously of another kind. The photographed *object* may well have all the characteristics of an object in sculpture, but the result of a photographic operation makes it into something quite different: it does effect a regulated substitution, a switching that takes it into another world than the phenomenal one of sculpture. It regulates, for example, the question of distance and the frame, instead of the beholder's necessarily physical experience of sculpture. It inscribes an object, not in depth and the "theatre" of phenomena, but in a surface with which the beholder will be confronted, in a kind of face-to-face.

One might say: it is the same for certain works by sculptors in two dimensions, the big canvases of Richard Serra, for example, or the "Tar paintings" of Bernar Venet, which convey the perception of mass, of its threatening weight, by other means than physical presence. And what we witness in the case of Valérie Belin is indeed something analogous – although the analogy is soon contradicted by the particularity of her approach.

For the mental and visual operation that she effects through the intermediary of photography consists in bringing towards us – with a certain violence and the sensation of intrusion – the object in question, which thus seems to enter our space, instead of us entering its space. Her photographs seem to capture the energy of a moving mass, an impact – sometimes a literal one, as with the wrecked cars, or in the deformed bodies of bodybuilders. This feeling results from precise technological choices that engender a tension between surface effects and the intrusive illusion of a volume. The object thus appears to us as a great, worked surface, but a surface that is somehow not a *tableau*, and that evokes a kind of *écorché* – a surface that is flayed but whose skin has immediately been put back, so that nothing or almost nothing is manifest, except for a slight lifting, an almost unconscious perception of the flesh under the skin, of the volume under the surface.

This "lifting" is no doubt due to the fact that the surface in question is grasped in its slightest details, but without any resulting flatness ("planarity" would be more exact) in what we see. For there is – I cannot for the moment find any other way of saying this – an art of making visible or, at least, palpable, what this surface rests on. This may be the result of a revelatory transparency authorised by the technology of photography. In the *Chips* series, for example, the optical precision is such that the screening of the printed lettering on the packets is revealed whereas we sense nothing of their contents. Here we are in a kind of infra-thin, a kind of microscopic cross-section in a living environment whose secret life is explored by the photographic "scalpel."<sup>2</sup> Belin seems to position

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<sup>2</sup> On the question of the "flatness" of photographic images, it is well worth reading the recent book by Eric de Chassey, *Platitudes—Une histoire de la photographie plate* (Gallimard, 2006). In Valérie Belin's work, the photograph only pretends to be flat, or rather, to have a paradoxical planarity. On this level, too, it remains in the register of false appearances.

herself at the exact dialectical switching point that Walter Benjamin observed in “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility,” where he draws a parallel between the filmmaker and the surgeon. For “the equipment-free aspect of reality” is possible, precisely, only if we renounce a global image in favour of “the most intensive interpenetration of reality.”<sup>3</sup>

We have the same feeling when we look at the mannequins, except that the depth, however slight it may have been before, here seems to be denied by the resistance of the support, and that we must make do with the grain of the different skins and the play of their respective qualities. Shop-window mannequins, living models, black women – all have different ways of catching the light, of revealing what is behind these surfaces of skin, be it the plasticity of life or the rigidity of the artificial. Or of not really revealing anything and leaving a lingering doubt.

For one of the questions that seems to engage Valérie Belin is precisely that thin zone of uncertainty and reversibility. Not that she is trying to create illusion in and for itself; rather, she is trying to grasp the minimal characteristics of an appearance of life, of a belonging to a species, on the fringe of things. Take for example a mask. Its nature is never in doubt and yet, when it is studied attentively by the camera the way a face can be, we come to ask where it is exactly that this persistent impression of life comes from: there is a bitterness, a petulance that are ready to come to life when grafted on the wearer’s face. Or, again, those carapaces worn by Moroccan brides, which turn them into bright, insect-like creatures and colonise their masked bodies in a metamorphosis that leaves only the face untouched – untouched, but still crushed too, by the ornamental carapace, and no longer the triumphant seat of the subject’s identity, as in traditional portraiture. The suppleness, the tension, the infinite sum of small imbalances that are the signs of life, are perceptible here only by default, by a substitutive tropism of our own gaze engaging with this becoming-insect.

The skin-clothing is often the site of these tensions: dresses/carapaces or dresses/shrouds in the case of those admirable dresses in Calais lace photographed in their “caskets-cum-coffins” setting and still seeming to tremble with an absent life – like effigies of the dead, or rather, frozen beings, who, in statuary, may correspond to that indefinite zone between life and death.<sup>4</sup> And what is the oiled and powdered skin of the bodybuilders if not a kind of integument, placed on the hypertrophied, monstrous mass of the musculature?

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<sup>3</sup> “Hence the presentation of reality in film is incomparably the more significant for people of today, since it provides the equipment-free aspect of reality they are entitled to demand from a work of art, and does so precisely on the basis of the most intensive interpenetration of reality with equipment.” From “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility” (third version, 1939), in Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 4, 1938-1940, Cambridge, Mass./London, Harvard Belknap, 2003, p. 264.

<sup>4</sup> Hermann Melville, it will be remembered, was fascinated by the notion of life-in-death, the ideal site of which he found in whiteness – or rather, whitenesses, for they are many and varied. These for him were the equivalent of that infra-thin medium whose specific use in photography I have tried to describe here.

A recent set of works on shop windows<sup>5</sup> makes it possible, I think, to specify this use of a “skin,” of an infra-thin zone in which visual elements are condensed. Here, too, technical determinants are used in the service of an idea of space that is possible only through photography. These shop windows are photographed with the maximal depth of field allowed by the view camera, with the result that everything is on the same plane of clarity: the objects contained in the window, the “stage” on which they are arranged, but also what lies behind and in front, like multiple reflections produced by the glass. All this, both interior and exterior, is compacted in a thin, virtual space, like a kind of “skin” corresponding to the depth of field habitually used by Valérie Belin, just enough for the object to be present in its totality. Here, the object is a kind of patchwork, a complex film made up of multiple over-printings, of scenes within the scene, of “ghosts.” This effect is reinforced by the very nature of the objects, most of which evoke absence (clothes awkwardly presented), or seem superannuated, like the ghosts of a bygone era, but an era not distant enough to have become part of history). The use of this compression is in some ways reminiscent of the work of Lee Friedlander, for example. But the differences are obvious: Friedlander produces a virtuoso composition of layered and interlocking signs, which exude the feeling of an energy, of endless resourcefulness. In contrast with this optimistic profusion, Belin’s work evokes the fragility of that which appears only within certain, highly specific parameters – images from the era of generalised hyper-relativity and virtuality.

The minimal depth here does not produce the same “radiographic” effect as in the case of the packets of “Chips.” It is more a matter of defining a field of operation or a field of experience. As with the bodybuilders and the wrecked cars, the subject is positioned precariously, in a kind of virtual “box” defined by the available depth of field (the difference is that the bodybuilders and wrecked cars were set in an illusory box that only just contained them, whereas here it is extended horizontally and vertically, but the structure is identical).

The recent colour portraits extend this meditation on artificiality – or, more exactly, on those zones where the identity of the photographed subjects becomes indeterminate. Here, too, there is an investigation of the external envelope. The portraits in the earlier series, as we have seen, also played on this epidermal zone. But they did so with an extremely precise attention (Belin describes it as “anthropomorphic”) that cast doubt on the distinction between animate and inanimate. Here the doubt remains, but the logic behind it is no longer that of cloning, which haunts the earlier series (shop-window mannequins modelled on the bodies of real women, real women who try to look like an ideal model, a stereotype, people who transform themselves into others – transsexuals, clones of Michael Jackson, etc.).

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<sup>5</sup> Series not reproduced in this book.

This logic (a type spawning clones, the “prints” derived from it) is now reversed. 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 subject its exact place in the table of bodies and “species,” computerised science samples from the real the elements needed to constitute 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 themselves in a virtual universe.” We are closer here to *Matrix* than to August Sander... The search for knowledge no longer consists in “peeling away” the layers of an external appearance (its “skins”) one by one in order to attain the truth of a subject but, on the contrary, in entering into the game of illusion, in mimicking the infinite capacity for multiplication of simulacra. But only in mimicking it, because to simply reproduce it would be sterile. Thus, the photographer settles for a limited number of examples in each series before swapping one subject for another, and so moving forward in her subtle exploration of the interplay between resemblance and illusion. And it is very much a question of swapping, of an endless play of exchange: one skin, one tatter, one “discard” for another.

Here, Belin is exploiting the capacity of photography to produce images. Certainly, these images bear a particular relation to an object that they evoke by their markedly analogical character. But they also contain, sometimes in a contradictory fashion, another dimension, another logic that calls into question the very idea of resemblance, to the benefit of the endless chain of simulacra, of avatars, of factitiousness.

The new portraits of models bring this feeling of unreality very much to the fore, especially if we compare them to the earlier portraits in black and white (*Modèles I*, 2001). These, as we have seen, played on the indistinctness of animate and inanimate, and on the idea of limitless cloning. The new portraits go further. Because the lighting is lateral, one side of the face is in the dark, giving the image an irregular outline, and cancelling any effect of volume. The colour is gentle, unsaturated, with a few brighter touches, giving the impression of a potentially “liquid” image, of the kind you sometimes get with those virtual ectoplasms that we see mutating at great speed in certain films or video games.

The *Métisses* series (2006) seems at first glance the opposite of this artificial universe in which the models are simple supports with no real identity, simply waiting for the one that they will be asked to present. Here, on the contrary, the young women look very distinctive, spectacular and even baroque, what with their extraordinarily elaborate accessories and makeup (false hair, coloured

lenses, various jewellery and adornments, etc.). 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, however, they embody another face of artificiality: not the passive and standardised 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 virtue of 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 contrasting faces; and, for another, that they confer on these models a power of expression that goes beyond their individual existence. Clones of a celebrity create variations around an image/referent to which they must be as faithful as possible. The young women have no referent, and it is this very absence that is the basis of their capacity for transformation. In this sense they are children's dolls, which come alive only through the outfits put on their inexpressive body, itself a plastic object that has no identity, only an obscene neutrality. Setting out to produce originality in a standardised world by means of their accessories and make-up, they nevertheless remain smooth and inexpressive, and ultimately unreal.

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