

TOBIA BEZZOLA

BLACK EYED SUSAN

VALÉRIE BELIN (BLACK EYED SUSAN)

MONOGRAPH

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Black eyed Susan

« Je viens de la peinture. » It is not surprising that Valérie Belin should describe her work as coming from painting, for it would be curious indeed to call her a photographer. She ignores everything that is inherently photographic. Although she uses a photographer's equipment, her masterful control of the technique enables her to transcend the imprint of reality and preclude reference to the world. Belin tells us nothing about the circumstances out there, she offers no evidence ; she advances no arguments and makes no comments. She takes the world and makes pictures out of it. Her latest moves – colour and montage – are therefore perfectly logical. Thanks to digital technology, she can now also impose her will on the pictures she creates in colour.

To repeat, Belin does not picture the world ; her forte is artistic style and her method is the series. She has photographed series of bodybuilders, potato chip packages, transvestites, car wrecks, mirrors, electronic waste, nightclub dancers, and much more. There is something explicitly feminine in what she does ; her understated picture planes do not obscure the potential empathy. They are also slightly wintry – glisteningly fresh and unscented, rhythmically afloat and never without a touch of laconic humour. No doubt about it, Belin is a superb designer of Baroque sur-réalité. She has an erringly French eye for discovering and capturing attitudes and allure. She can sniff out posing and affectation even in cars and animal cadavers. She turns them all into big-eyed mannequins : mute faceless beauties with no history. Accordingly, her œuvre is also a large-scale study in every conceivable form of emptiness, but it is an emptiness that deliberately gone to extremes, be it a Lido dancer, a magician or a basket of fruit. No one tries to hide the make-up or the closeness to the lamplight ; everything is done for effect. Latent, ice-cool eroticism : the radiance and clarity of the pictures merely enhances their enigmatic appeal. Belin does not seek extravagance, distortion or

tantalizing provocation. Her most strikingly compelling illusions do not glorify the warmth of the flesh ; on the contrary, they confront us with a disconcerting désincarnation – like Casanova, we suddenly realize that we are dancing with puppets.

Valérie Belin loves the artists who populate the vaudeville stage of daily life. Poseurs one and all. Even nature is of interest only as a garden, an arrangement, a stage set. She delights in pomp and circumstance, in sumptuous backdrops, honing the ability to control their impact by exaggerating them. She immerses us in a universe of mirrors, damask, gold trim, crystal and garlands. The enchanting illusion is the subject matter of her art and her series of « Magicians » is hardly fortuitous. She consistently toys with deception, appearances and gullibility. Supreme sophistication is the device used to visualize the most guileful deceits, as much in the searing light of hard shadows as in the faux-flou of blurred, superimposed images (e.g. the Têtes couronnées series). Never has photography been so far removed from naïve naturalism and normality. A hairdo that looks perfectly natural, proves to be a stiff wif. Even individuality turns out to be a scam – tout est faux ! Who is the beautiful dancer at the Lido, whose changes of costume frame a smile frozen in the immuable mask of her face, and who are the six gorgeous and almost indistinguishable dark girls in Untitled, 2006 ?

It would be off target to consider this œuvre cool and artificial only because it so eloquently renders coolness and artificiality. Or to assume that, having so brilliantly mastered the means of glamour, it exhausts itself in glamour's aura. The opposite applies. All successful art reaffirms the rights of nature. What has been stylized must be stylized to the second power in order to break the spell of phoniness. With almost childlike astonishment and unbridled confidence, Valérie Belin transforms the overwrought stylization, the obvious veneer of artificiality that she encounters in the world, into images that are larger-than-life. The dancers, magicians, and beauty queens in her pictures are empowered, reclaiming the right to be the entirely unadulterated, charming and unaffected individuals they once were.

Translation : Catherine Schelbert

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